

Mexico City Theatre (Spring 2000)

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Mexico City's Spring 2000 theatre season featured a number of first-rate plays as part of a generally robust season. I expected to find at least a handful of plays dealing with politics because of the upcoming July presidential election, but did not find a single one. Granted, three plays which dealt indirectly with politics ended their runs before my arrival. Of the three, Rodolfo Usigli's *Noche de estío*, a 1930s play about corruption in Mexico's ruling party, had the most overt political message. José Ramón Enríquez's *Enrique IV* was more veiled in that it dealt with power and intrigue in medieval Spain. Elena Garro's *Felipe Angeles* was also indirect. Perhaps of more importance than their political ties, these plays were reportedly excellent theatre. Enríquez plays are always cerebral and often have literary and historical ties to Spain, yet his directing makes even difficult texts relatively accessible to audiences. Luis de Tavira directed *Felipe Angeles*, a four-hour spectacle rich with visual imagery as has become typical of de Tavira-directed plays. Instead of politics, plays about interpersonal relationships seemed to dominate most of the season's best plays. Although Mexico is not known for stable theatre companies, some of the season's best work came from companies which have been in existence for the better part of a decade, or more; some of them are bearing fruit.

Ecos y sombras: cuando las palabras no te alcanzan, a play written and directed by Alberto Lomnitz, was accomplished and moving. A play about the world of the deaf in Mexico, its cast included such luminaries in Mexican theatre as Luis Rábago and Joana Brito, as well as members of the deaf professional theatre company Señá y Verbo. According to its web-site, the company began in 1992, has an artistic and educational mission, and has produced over 500 performances throughout Mexico and on four international stints. *Ecos y sombras* was noteworthy not just because of the way it delved into fascinating subject matter, but also because of tremendous artistic achievement in its clever plot construction, live performance of original music,

and the use of stage space, lighting, sound effects, on-stage painting, and sign language. The play wove together variations on how people become deaf, how they interact with each other and with hearing people, and on how the hearing interact with the deaf. Stage-right represented an apartment with a family which included two older children deaf from birth and a mother who had been militant in insisting that they learn to read lips rather than use sign language. The daughter dutifully tried to read lips but was essentially homebound due to her disability. The son returned home after an absence during which he learned to sign and as a result became independent. He also brought home a hearing girlfriend who also signed. The girlfriend started to teach the sister sign language, but the relationships never fully healed and the sister was left alone in her silent world when the brother and girlfriend left. In the apartment next door, stage-left, lived a highly successful opera director, his glamorous young opera-star wife, and his estranged teenaged son. This man, whose profession had revolved around his hearing, became deaf and as a result withdrew emotionally and socially, bringing about a separation from his wife and his work. Eventually, in exceptionally moving scenes, he rediscovered the world, connected with his son as never before (which included finding out that his son was painting a fascinating mural in his bedroom), and set out to do what he could with an increased appreciation for his abilities rather than focusing on his limitations. One of the most beautiful parts of the play involved masterfully delivered monologues by Rábago. He spoke of the challenges of life being like a strenuous hike to the top of a volcano, and as he spoke, Sergio Isaac Falconi, one of the deaf actors, “interpreted” his monologues through corporal and facial expression. Falconi’s images of struggle and success – climbing, flying, contemplating the view at the top – were exquisite and moving. Lights were used to create different dramatic spaces. Lighting allowed a hallway to appear behind the apartments and become a theatrical space for several scenes. In another scene, at the opera director’s moment of re-entry into society, photographic images of the world were projected onto the walls of the apartment, and he observed them poignantly from behind. A similar effect illuminated the teenage son’s bedroom, causing a wall to become transparent and creating an otherwise unseen space. Most of the two apartments actually occupied the same space, but lighting and orientation of the furniture let the audience know which apartment they were in. Maximiliano Torres and Fernando Domínguez Legorret performed original music hauntingly on the double bass and clarinet from time to time, and transformed into actors for an opera rehearsal scene. Spectators were

immersed into the world of the deaf through the use of sound effects – sounds and words from other actors became distorted over the sound system as the opera director lost his hearing. Eventually, the audience heard nothing but saw lips move and people gesture, giving them experiences similar to those of the play's protagonist. The most overtly pedagogical part of the play was the representation of a session at a conference, during which the participants debated whether sign language is truly a language different from spoken language, and on the relationship between signs and words. According to this debate, 90% of deaf children in Mexican households are not allowed to use sign language. *Ecos y sombras* managed to teach audiences about the challenges of being deaf without being preachy, through a highly poignant work of dramatic art. This was one of the most memorable plays this critic has ever seen.

Another of the season's finest offerings was *La esposa muda*, a shorter piece (approximately 40 minutes) performed by Teatro Grande y Pequeño, a group formed in 1994. The plot was based on an anonymous play from 16th century Italy, and the cast and director, Alicia Martínez Alvarez, made highly successful use of dramatic conventions from the Commedia dell'Arte, including character types, costumes, exaggerated props, formal speaking and gesturing, and the use of masks. The historical aspect of the



La Esposa Muda

Photo by David Villarreal



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Photo by David Villarreal

play was richly enhanced by performing it in the courtyard adjacent to the colonial cloister of the Centro Cultural Helénico, thus giving the performance area lovely arched stone backdrops, along with a small fountain and trees. Teatro Grande y Pequeño has performed this play in a number of open air settings around Mexico, but this setting was particularly apt. While in many ways *La esposa muda* was a Renaissance piece, it was simultaneously contemporary and Mexican. In fact, the rapid-fire dialogue featured numerous allusions to Mexican politics and history as well as to modern technology and institutions. It also included nimble allusions to Neruda's poetry, sections performed in a kind of rap style, and numerous double-entendres. The cast of three women, each of whom delivered splendid acting performances, even did a bit of hilarious improvised interaction with late-arriving spectators. The masks were exceptionally expressive, with pronounced cheekbone features covering each of the actors' faces from the mouth up, but leaving their eyes free to speak volumes. Cast members told me the masks were produced in France by Etienne Champion, who created them based on molds taken of each actor's face. The plot (a *dottore* granted a husband's previously mute wife the gift of speaking, then the husband desperately requested deafness) was entertaining but shallow, a shortcoming which was easily forgiven because of the play's numerous strengths.

Opción múltiple, written by Luis Mario Moncada and directed by Iona Weissberg, was another definite star from this season. This play turned on the idea that the main character was suffering a multiple personality disorder, and thus five different actresses were required to play her and her several personalities. By contrast, the three male characters were played by the same actor, Hernán Mendoza. The five actresses, always dressed identically, interacted with each other, but upon the appearance of another character, four of them would vacate the main stage area and watch the public personality from behind a sheet of glass. The five very different personalities who inhabited Diana's body were brilliantly chosen female archetypes. The main Diana was in psychological therapy because she was painfully indecisive and preferred to turn her life over to the other Dianas. The second was an 11-year old child compulsively afraid of breaking glass. The third was stereotypically masculine, aggressive, foul-mouthed, and dense. She conspicuously chewed gum, bobbed her head constantly to a beat provided by the headphones from a personal stereo, walked and sat like a muscle-bound man, and dealt with relationships physically rather than verbally. The fourth Diana was obsessed with appearances and worked to make everything about her seem socially acceptable. She was always mopping up the awkward social pieces left by the other Dianas. The last Diana was a Pandora's box – cruel, lascivious, and insulting. She relished getting the other Dianas into trouble. Several of the scenes from *Opción múltiple* were enormously hilarious, particularly when Diana would spend time with one of the male characters. For example, when Medardo visited her to go on a date, the various Dianas took turns with him, which was quite an experience for a man unaware of his date's psychological problems. When the first Diana started to feel uncomfortable with him, she rushed to the back room and forced another of the Dianas into the date. Each one treated Medardo in accordance with her personality – the second screamed in horror when he gave her flowers in a glass vase, the third nearly decapitated him, the fourth smoothed things out, but the last whisked him away to the bedroom while the other four Dianas gasped in horror. Although overall the play was extremely funny, it had a deeply serious and dark side in Diana's suffering. As the play approached closure, the psychologist identified a traumatic event which happened to Diana at age 11, thus getting at the root of her problems. In his final session of therapy with Diana she bid farewell to the other Dianas, apparently a happy ending. But then the responsible, calm, helpful psychologist took off his beard and psychologist garb, transformed into the playboy Gerardo, and transformed



Opción múltiple
Photo by José Jorge Carreón

the stage into an enormous bed by covering it with an enormous piece of cloth which had been hidden in a niche at the front of the stage. The play's final image was of the playboy and all five Dianas jostling under the covers, suggesting that Diana's troubles were far from over. The acting was uniformly excellent, with particular kudos to Perla Villa for her spectacular representation of the masculine Diana. Also noteworthy was the seamless performance by understudy Isabel Bazán, who stood in for the first Diana the night I attended. The costumes were extremely well done, exposing different sides to the multiple personalities, the set design incorporated patterns and colors which suggested personality disorders, the music had the same effect, always ending with the sound of breaking glass, and the dialogue was excellent. In short, this play's multiple elements worked together to form a brilliant, comic, yet disturbing work of art.

The theatre group Utopía Urbana performed *¡Vieja el último!* by Perla Szuchmacher, Alegría Martínez and Larry Silberman. This group, created in 1989 and headed by Roberto Vázquez, is undoubtedly one of Mexico's most prolific theatre groups, having performed the eight plays from their repertory literally hundreds of times each. The performance I saw was one of 19 done by the group during a 10-day stretch, and the first of six that day. Despite their incredible production, they are not well-known in mainstream theatre circles because theirs is by design popular theatre, a street theatre for the masses, performed for free to the public, primarily in the financially meager suburb of Ciudad Nezahuacoyotl and without any media publicity. The day's six performances were sponsored by the Unión Popular Revolucionaria Emiliano Zapata (UPREZ), a wing of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas' Partido de la Revolución Democrática, in honor of the *Día del Niño*. UPREZ put up a tarp, set up chairs, and transported the group from performance to performance. The company arrived at 9:25, put together the set, costumes and sound equipment, and started announcing the play over a loudspeaker. At 10:10 the performance started with about 30 spectators. By the end of the play, about an hour later, I estimated the crowd at approximately 200 people. When the play ended the theatre group rushed all its theatrical belongings to their transport to scurry to its next performance, and UPREZ was left to work the crowd for the upcoming election. This was a completely different sociological system for delivering theatre than the mainstream, and one which was obviously very successful.

Fortunately, the performance itself of *¡Vieja el último!* was extremely well done. This was children's theatre, aimed gently at encouraging children

to rid themselves of sexist stereotypes. The title refers to a saying used by children in Mexico, suggesting that the slowest playmate is an old woman. The performance featured two children characters playing together at a friend's house in anticipation of his birthday party. The character portrayed by actress Mireya Hernández, dressed as a boy, interacted with actor Rubén Corona's character. They acted out together a wild adventure on the high seas, which included pirates, sharks, desert islands, and Moby Dick, then they pretended to be in a rodeo, and finally a circus. At one point they pretended to confront their fears together. They battled a drunkard, a spider, and a bogeyman, all on stilts with eye-catching costumes. When the little boy discovered that his playmate was a girl, he decided to change his mind about girls' uselessness. Hernández and Corona delivered highly energetic, professional performances. The use of props was highly imaginative and effective, the costumes were evocative, and the reaction of the audience was electric. This was excellent theatre despite (or perhaps enhanced by) the non-traditional circumstances.

UNAM did not take long after its long and highly publicized student strike to start producing excellent theatre once again. Its initial post-strike offerings included three Spanish plays, *Las bicicletas de Buster Keaton*, written by Federico García Lorca and directed by José Ramón Enríquez, a Calderón *auto sacramental*, *La cena del Rey Baltasar*, and a spectacular production of *La Celestina*, adapted and directed by Claudia Ríos. Luisa Huertas delivered a spooky, sinister performance of the manipulative title character of *La Celestina* on a stage composed primarily of a large rustic ramp at a roughly 20 degree incline, which included several trap doors. Around the ramp were small rocks making a walkway which sounded lovely as the actors walked on it. The back of the stage featured tall interchangeable murals which alternated between haunting red stars for night scenes and lovely pastoral scenes for the day. All doors and walls sprung from the imagination of the audience based on the splendid performances of the actors. Unfortunately, by contrast, some of the scenes were openly sexual, leaving little to the imagination of spectators, undermining some of the play's strengths, and severely limiting the potential audience.

UNAM's other mainstage play was the entertaining metatheatrical piece *Última llamada*, written by young playwright Ilya Cazet and directed by a young director, Sergio Galindo (who is not the fine novelist by the same name). Following the theme "the show must go on," a theater technician and an aspiring actor received word that the cast, set, and script for the play to be performed shortly in their theater were stuck in traffic. The two were directed

to perform the play as it arrived via fax. The result was absurd but very funny, as the two performed *Papacito, pásame la sal de uvas*, a ridiculous play about an inane expedition to the North Pole. The technician, performed by one of Mexico's leading comic actors, Jesús Ochoa, was reluctant at first, but eventually became immersed in his role. By contrast, the presumptuous actor, played very well by Emilio Guerrero, started out enthusiastically and ended disillusioned. In reality, the play was an indictment of the conditions too often present in Mexican theatre – absurd scripts, improvisation, technical problems, egotism, and amateurism. Several of the special effects were nice, including lighting in the shape of an igloo on the stage and lightly falling snow. The finest moments, however, were when Ochoa's character did things like improvise the cookout of a seal, which he did in the most Mexican way possible, *al pastor*, turning a gray cushion on a vertical spit. This was a very funny play performed very well.

The Sociedad General de Escritores Mexicanos (SOGEM), currently headed by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, provides services to Mexican writers, has a library, offers classes to aspiring writers, and has a trio of theaters which they seemed to be using to a greater capacity this year. One of the finest offerings at a SOGEM theater this year was the fine mystery *El enigma del esqueleto azul* by Norma Román Calvo. The finely constructed plot involved love, crime, corruption, amnesia, a savvy stereotypical detective, and a wonderfully integrated Oedipus complex. Even elements that at first seemed to be included only as attention-grabbers turned out to be important parts of the plot. The acting performances were very professional, the set very sleek, and the use of language very clever. Another fine SOGEM offering this year was *El aplauso de las focas* by young playwright Edgar Alvarez. This metatheatrical play poked fun at metatheatre itself, and compared spectators to mindless seals which applaud endlessly. Hugo Fragoso's *En tiempos de don Porfirio* did not live up to Fragoso's usual standards of excellence. This piece sought to revive the skits, music, and dancing from the "Teatro de Revista" which dominated Mexican stages early last century. Unfortunately, the skits were not particularly funny, the music was uneven, and the dancing was fine, but not spectacular.

Oscar Liera's haunting play *El camino rojo a Sabaiba* was performed in Ludwik Margules' theater El Foro de Teatro Contemporáneo. Margules himself directed the play in the foro's intimate space which was made even smaller for this play. In fact, only 22 seats were available to spectators, but each seat was filled. I always marvel when casts are almost as large as the

audience; in this case there were 15 performers. This play was the theatrical equivalent of Juan Rulfo's classic novel *Pedro Páramo*, in that each of the characters was deceased, the main character returned to a godforsaken town on an errand of vengeance at his mother's request, and dark feelings of suffering, sin, vengeance, sexuality, and resentment dominated characters' lives. The actors were exceptionally disciplined in their austere roles under unforgivingly intimate circumstances. Bleak costumes, stark unshaded lightbulbs, and a severe set matched the personalities and long monologues of the characters trapped in their Mexican purgatory. This play required highly sophisticated and patient spectators who had to fill in the blanks and piece together the jumbled plot just as the reader must do for Rulfo's novel.

Finally, León Chávez's one-man play continued its long run of once-a-week performances which began in 1998, and which still packed the theater the night I saw it. Actually, the play consisted of two monologues. *En duermevela* was written in about 1987 by Alejandro Ostoia, and dealt with the musings and feelings of love, pain, generosity and suicide of a man who had broken off a relationship with his lover. Curiously, León Chávez wrote the first monologue, *El joven del traje de seda blanco* ten years after *En duermevela*, but it represented a moment four years before its predecessor in the life of the same man. In *El joven...* the man had just met his future companion and was full of hope. Chávez did an admirable job of altering his gestures, rhythms, and speech to maintain the audience's interest for 90 solid minutes. More than the use of lights and props, he connected with the audience and even shook each spectator's hand as the audience left. This was a very fine monologue which treated a homosexual relationship with unusual dignity.

People who work in Mexico City's theatre circles wonder what changes Mexico's new president and his administration will effect on their world and upon the production of art in the country in general. The level and type of governmental support always varies from administration to administration, but I see evidence that Mexican theatre is sufficiently vigorous, creative and mature to continue producing for many years. Although Mexico continues to produce some inexcusable theatre that panders to the basest human instincts, and other performances are less than accomplished, its best theatre is truly excellent and contributes significantly to Mexico's considerable cultural production.

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