

## Summer 2000 Puppet Theatre in Mexico, For Adults and Children Only

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Puppets are for kids, of course, so puppet theatre is not really “serious” theatre. At any rate it is not usually an exact image of “adult” theatre, but why should it be? Children can already get enough gore, grit, sex, and violence in movies, music, television shows, cartoons, and “grown up” theatre. Most puppet theatre is not that, but a good percentage of it *is* entertainment (which would seem to be a good thing), learning (not necessarily even didactic), stories, ideas, history, culture, imagination, and a multitude of other mind-stimulating possibilities. So on the one hand, puppet theatre is generally not considered “serious, adult” theatre. On the other hand, though, if the term “serious, adult” may be taken to mean the communication of knowledge, information and ideas, and a way to encourage involvement and imagination, then puppet theatre fits the bill. On the other hand (well, they *are* puppets, so we can give them as many hands as we like), it is also serious if serious involves introducing children to theatre and the arts and opening doors that they may want to keep open, because today’s children will need to appreciate, support, and contribute to the arts tomorrow. Despite its popular image, then, puppet theatre might really be a solid enterprise.

My introduction to puppet theatre came in Mexico, and primarily through the Tercera Muestra Nacional de Teatro de Títeres sponsored in three sites in Mexico City by the Unión Internacional de la Marioneta (UNIMA) during the week of August 6, 2000. Near the end of the week, the Muestra Nacional turned international, with the participation of groups from Cuba, Portugal, and Spain. The central site offered two plays a day for eight days, at noon and at 5:00. The space, which seated over 250 spectators, was always at least half full (just the seats; children sat on the floor in front of the performing area), and for many performances, attendance was nearly at capacity. This

represents “serious” attendance, especially considering the number of “adult” dramas performed before audiences of 75 or fewer.

Puppet theatre functions, to a great extent, on the basis of groups, and over 15 presented during the *Muestra*. Puppets have a long history in Mexico, dating back to pre-Columbian times (a history that represents a study all its own).<sup>1</sup> Recently these functions reached a high point when, in the 1940’s, the government began sponsoring groups for educational purposes. After mid-century, that support waned and activity dropped off, but over the past 20 years, puppeteers have begun to organize – UNIMA, for example – and currently over 50 groups are working. Groups come and go, although some have been around for years. For example, Mireya Cueto’s *Espiral* is a dozen years old, and both Grupo Ikerín and Grupo Serendipity have been in existence for about a quarter century. One family, the Cuetos, have been a constant for three, going on four, generations (currently in the hands of Mireya Cueto, second generation, and her son, Pablo, third, with a daughter whose interest has been piqued). Puppet theatre may still labor under the this-is-only-for-kids perception, but on any given weekend in and around Mexico City, children accompanied by parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, and neighbors can attend any of more than a dozen plays. Most of them free and well-attended. Many are sponsored by the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, one branch being an on-going program called “*Alas y Raíces a los Niños*.” Puppet theatre in Mexico seems to be alive and well.

The puppets are alive and well to degrees, depending on the skill of the puppeteer, and they come in all shapes, sizes, and forms. There are puppets manipulated by hand, by one or more rods, by one or more people; there are shadow puppets, and there are puppets that come to life under black light. Curiously, about the only kind of puppet not represented in the festival sponsored by UNIMA was the “*marioneta*.” Apparently relatively few groups work with string puppets because of the high degree of skill required. Nevertheless there was more than enough variety to make up for the lack of string. In addition to the different methods of operation, the puppets ranged in size from finger puppets to full, human size and they represented people as well as animals, plants, the sun and moon, clouds, and a host of fantastic creatures.

The world that they inhabit comes alive much as the world in an “adult” play, although perhaps with more freedom, because in the puppet world, unrestricted by many of the normal laws of physics, animals and people can fly, shift in form and size, and talk. Of course actors can do most of this in the theatre, but there is a difference in the level of response and acceptance

of the staged reality when a real person defies nature's laws and when an already accepted talking animal puppet does the same. For the latter, the leap is not as great. The theatre-goer's willing suspension of disbelief expands, then, to become accepting of and more times than not an extension of and a participant in a world of the imagination. This other world resonates symbolically on a level that can become more real, individual, and personal than in other types of theatre, in part, paradoxically, because the puppets are less real. Raquel Bárcena, former director of the Museo Nacional del Títere, says, "Los títeres son expresión simbólica, que, a través de síntesis, fantasía y metáfora, toca las fibras inconscientes del espectador constituyéndose así, en un vehículo privilegiado de comunicación."<sup>2</sup> Children are the first to accept and join in, eager to give advice to and help the characters; adults enter through a different door, since they have more personal history and experience that can be touched by the symbolic nature of the figures they watch on stage. Both groups, though, find new points of entry that may be less difficult to open than in "regular" theatre with real people on stage.

The world where the characters exist can revolve around any number of themes: the importance of protecting animals, the beauty of music, overcoming fear, and the value of friendship, to name a few. It also incorporates the transmission of legends, a move toward myth reflected in the structure of many puppet plays. These moves include a series of steps (a nod toward the attention span of young children) that frequently involve searches: a character (or characters) who leaves home and looks for something or someone. The steps of departing, searching, passing through a series of adventures, and finally finding the object provide depth, a synchronic dimension in a diachronic world. We can see the scope of puppet theatre even in the relatively few examples offered by the Tercera Muestra.

Two plays took on the task of introducing music, although in different ways. In *Concierto en Do Guiñol* (Grupo Ikerín) musical instruments in the various families (woodwind, brass and percussion) go in search of other families so as to form an orchestra and, in the process, present different kinds and sounds of instruments. *Entre azul y buena música* (Grupo Teatro Azul) featured a series of well-known selections (ranging from "Green Sleeves" to "The Barber of Seville") played live as background to the adventures of a busy worm who appeared in costumes and to stories that corresponded to the period of the musical piece. "Concierto" was the more direct of the two; "Entre azul," though, allowed universally recognizable music to be heard –

perhaps for the first time by the younger children – and to be associated with interesting, humorous stories.

Perhaps the play most directed at children was *El planeta rojo* (La Ventana), the story of a little boy afraid of noises and the dark. He dreams that the moon teaches him to fly and takes him to “el planeta rojo,” where he encounters beings strangely similar to the mosquito whose buzzing had frightened him before he went to sleep, and where he discovers how to overcome his fears. The puppets were designed on the basis of a child’s drawings for the story, so the play evolved with a very young audience in mind. Still, the incorporation of the character’s reality in his dream within the play reflects an external reality (fear of noises in the dark) incorporated into fantasy (the play), then couched in a secondary fantasy (the dream), which results in a kind of children’s puppet metatheatre.

At the other end of the spectrum, *Ya viene Gregorio Esparza* (Grupo Malintzín) was the least child oriented. The characters were puppets, and there were moments of humor, but the story focused primarily on the title character, a macho type who kills two men in a bar, kills his wife and dumps her into a well, kills some more people and, finally, in jail, suspects that he has done wrong and commits suicide by blowing himself up. When he gets to heaven, all is forgiven, and in he goes. Visually the play’s violence was more Punch and Judy than the gore and guts that show up in movies and on television regularly; it also had the sound and feel of some current, popular Mexican *norteño* music. Still, it did contain violence, and the message and the action certainly did not have the innocence of the other plays.

Another play that treads the line between children and adults, although in a different way from *Gregorio Esparza*, was the one presented by Mireya Cueto’s group (Espiral). *Historia Revuelta* has three parts. In the first part, three witches and a serpent dance, and music and movement are the focus. The third part presents a sort of nursery rhyme in verse with a frog, mice, cats (who steal the mice), and a large duck (who swallows the frog). The second part relates the legend of the “rey enano de Uxmal.” In the contest to determine if the *enano* (not born of woman) will take the throne, the reigning king dies. One can find resonances of other cultures, fables and myths here. The mythic sub-structure and tone attenuate the moments of violence while preserving and passing on a culture’s folk traditions to a new generation.

*Pedro y el lobo* (grupo Haiku) does the same with a more recent theme – the protection of animals. Pedro recognizes the beauty and value of a series of animals and refuses to kill the play’s villain, a big, bad, fierce wolf,

because he understands that the wolf chased the other animals only because it was hungry.

Most of the plays made some overt attempt, on however small a scale, to encourage audience participation. *Pedro y el lobo*, the only play performed in a totally darkened theatre (due to the puppets appearing in blacklight) maintained the most separation, although children still reacted to the wolf. The most interactive were the one-person plays (groups ranged from two to six members, with the average being three to four). As the number of puppeteers rises, control of children's participation (they *do* get caught up and involved) and coordination among group members become more difficult. Larger groups can present more puppets simultaneously, but *Titirijugando* (Carlos Converso) and *¿Dónde está?* (Lourdes Aguilera) still managed to work in almost a dozen puppets each: Converso incorporates two separate stories and a sequence of direct contacts with the audience, and Aguilera focuses on one, longer story. If the goal is to entertain, teach, and pull the audience into the project actively, these two certainly succeeded.

Other plays had other goals. *Pequeñas cosas* (Las Mentirosas) revolved around playing with available objects. *El Circo Serendipity* (Grupo Serendipity) was just that, a circus, with clowns, lion tamers, and a host of animals. In the international component, the Cuban group Papalote related a fable (*Las ibeyis y el diablo*) in which twins defeat the devil. Esfera Teatro from Spain, with only two puppets, some excellent acting, and an extraordinary amount of interaction with both children and adults in the audience, presented an entertaining story of the search for true love (*Doce besos*).

While it was impossible to see all the plays in the Muestra, those mentioned here suggest the variety and the possibilities represented in puppet theatre. While this kind of theatre labors under the perception that it is kid's stuff, clearly it is not just that, but even if it were, it accomplishes an extraordinary amount. This theatre educates, maintains traditions, opens other worlds, introduces the arts, represents and stimulates the imagination, encourages active rather than passive reaction and participation, and entertains. Above all it entertains. It provides direct, live, family entertainment, a not so common experience nowadays. Over the course of a week the Tercera Muestra Nacional de Teatro de Títeres, in its three venues, provided all that to several thousand children and adults. Family entertainment with no strings attached. Today that is a valuable bargain.<sup>3</sup>

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>For an overview see McPharlin, especially pages 6-7, 69-74, 239-254, and 601-603.

<sup>2</sup>Raquel Bárcena Molina, Introduction from the Catalogue for the Museo Nacional del Títere, in Huamantla, Tlaxcala, México.

<sup>3</sup>Thanks to Daniel Vázquez (President of UNIMA in Mexico), Sergio Montero (spokesperson and Treasurer), and Alejandro Toriz (coordinator of the site) for their invaluable assistance.

**Works Consulted**

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