



Hace ya tanto tiempo
México, 2001

Mexico City's Spring 2001 Theatre Season

Timothy G. Compton

Mexico City's theatre world continues vibrant. Even though some insiders expressed that the spring 2001 season was not the city's finest, it featured several plays which were masterpieces in their sub-genres, and numerous plays which merited high commendation. Quality of performances ranged from virtuosity to somewhat less than mediocre. As happens year-round except during the Christmas season, theatre-goers could always count on being able to choose from numerous plays. Nevertheless, methods of publicity continue uneven at best, and outside of the main theatre centers (UNAM, INBA) one often has to be an insider to get the honest low-down on whether a play is really running, how early to arrive to get a seat, and what kind of audience the play seeks. President Vicente Fox seems to have theatre practitioners guessing still – so far he has not delivered on promises to bolster the arts, but hopes have not died. One very encouraging sign was that the venerable theatres in the old INBA complex in Chapultepec park have been renovated and are much improved, which seems to have attracted top-notch plays and more abundant audiences.¹ More than half of the season's plays were written by Mexicans, with the remainder forming a healthy mix of classics and contemporary theatre from around the world. The cult of "newness" seems to characterize the plays by Mexicans, as the vast majority of plays written by Mexicans and performed during this season were written recently. A wave of plays with all-women casts, most of which featured women's themes, also distinguished this season. Overall, attendance at the plays I saw this year outpaced the attendance of the other nine seasons I have witnessed. In short, the spring 2001 season in Mexico City had plenty to tout.²

Vicente Leñero wrote one of the season's masterpieces, *Hace ya tanto tiempo*. Its glow came primarily from compelling dialogue and

characters, coupled with excellent acting. The play's dramaturgical twist was that Leñero wrote the first act in 1984 and the second act in 2001. Act one was a self-contained short play that made its way to the stage several times by the year 2000. It featured the reunion of a man and a woman who had considered marrying each other 37 years earlier but had broken off the relationship. They discussed in poignant yet nebulous, almost mysterious terms their breakup nearly four decades earlier. Silvia Caos of Mexican television fame and Ignacio Retes, who has been a key player in Mexican theatre since the heyday of Rodolfo Usigli, masterfully played the older couple. In addition to acting in and directing the play, the program reported that Retes had cajoled Leñero into creating the second act, portraying the fateful day of the rift 37 years prior. Antonio Crestani, the director of Teatro y Danza at UNAM, and Eugenia Leñero, an award-winning actress who also happens to be Vicente's daughter, played the 1964 couple with mastery equal to Caos and Retes. The act explored the way in which he threw himself at her, but she could see that his conception of an ideal relationship with her would have stifled her aspirations to become a writer and her ability to develop as she desired. The play ended after she asked him to leave not just her house, but her life. Leñero expertly wove the two acts together by revisiting numerous motifs from the first act in the second. Two examples illustrate this idea. First, in the first act, the former suitor took advantage of his partner's absence from the living room to pocket a porcelain figure from the fireplace mantel. In the second act, 37 years earlier, the suitor asked for the figure but she refused. Second, the "viejita" had to convince the "viejito" to have a drink with her – his health had forced him to go dry. Ironically, in the second act the "joven" had to convince his very reluctant partner to have a drink with him. *Hace ya tanto tiempo* explored the intimacies of love, relationships, communication, feminism and machismo, memory, and aging.

The set was traditional with two slight twists. On the traditional side, it portrayed a realistic house with the proverbial imaginary fourth wall between the spectators and the actors. The twists consisted first, of showing the second and third walls – making it very much a human-sized dollhouse, and second, orienting it at a 10-15 degree angle from the audience. Although the orientation impaired the view of 10-15% of the audience seats (some were literally blocked off from use), this set technique gave the play a simultaneously traditional and modern feel. It coupled realism with a reminder that this was not reality. In an age when much theatre looks to attract spectators through special effects, flamboyant sets, costumes, acting or music, through outrageous topics,

or even salaciousness, this play proved that excellent acting, character creation, and dialogue still create theatre of the most compelling kind.

Feliz Nuevo Siglo Doktor Freud, written by Sabina Berman and directed by Sandra Félix, revisited two of Berman's favorite topics – how men have messed up women and how intellectuals have messed up society. *Doktor Freud* has had an admirable run starting in November of 2000 and has packed the newly refurbished Teatro Orientación ever since. The night I attended, the audience consisted of a higher percentage of elegantly dressed, “mature” spectators than the audience of any play I can recall seeing in Mexico. The play focused on Freud's famous work on “el caso Dora,” fluctuating often and brilliantly between Freud narrating his findings in the case, Freud interviewing and treating Dora in the classic psychotherapeutic fashion, and portrayals of the events Dora and those close to her were living. Often sentences started in one mode and ended in another, making for instant, delightful transitions between scenes. Freud was depicted as someone so full of his own intellectual magnificence that it took three actors to play him in the scenes in which he would report on his findings. Almost like a cancerous duplication of something gone mad, each of the three embodiments of the father of psychotherapy absolutely fawned over the others, effectively communicating a hilarious smugness, although the character was not trying to be funny. Ricardo Blume, Juan Carlos Beyer and Enrique Singer played the trio with impeccable comic timing and delightful visual impact, always with a cigar prominently in hand. Blume played Freud throughout, but in the scenes showing Dora's life, Singer played Dora's father, Herr F, while Beyer played Herr K, who was seeking an affair with Dora even as his wife was stepping out with Dora's father. Their affair-filled world fascinated Dora, admirably played by Marina de Tavira, and when she reported it to Freud during their therapeutic sessions, Freud hyper-sexualized everything to hilarious extremes. Eventually, one of Freud's students offered an independent opinion suggesting that Freud had been way off in his thinking, to Dora's harm. In a scene depicting her return to Freud 14 years later it was obvious that he had done her no service with his therapy.

The set, designed by Philippe Amand, provided wonderfully adaptable spaces for the play's various settings, and wonderful use of lighting techniques, also designed by Amand, complemented the set. In essence, the set consisted of six elegant sliding doors which divided the stage horizontally. Behind the doors were three platforms several feet high which could slide toward the audience once the doors were opened. The doors opened right or left, solo or

in concert with other doors in any combination. Thus, the play's action could take place in front of the doors directly on the stage, or behind any of the doors as they opened on a raised platform, or in front of the doors on one of the platforms. The audience never knew which door or combination of doors was going to open, what characters or props were going to be present, or where the action would take place. The set lent itself to fluid transitions between numerous settings which took life through judicious use of props and lights. In an unforgettable dream sequence stemming from a therapy session, for example, Dora's hellish dream came to life behind a line of literal two-foot flames along the front tip of the stage. A nighttime exterior train scene was ingeniously created through the use of sound and a spotlight in fog simulating a locomotive headlight. A scene just as deftly executed simulated the interior of a moving train through moving rectangular lights. In a final stroke of ingenuity, one of the play's scenes took place at midnight on December 31, 1899, and the characters ushered in the new year and century, hence the title of the play. Yet, audience members saw double meaning in the title, as they were greeting Freud in a new century of their own, and the play greeted him by thoroughly roasting him. Excellent acting, sumptuous costumes, humorous yet thought-provoking dialogue, outstanding set design, topics of universal interest, and the creation of scenes and transitions which could only be fully maximized in a theatre setting all combined to create a masterpiece.

The third masterpiece of the season, in my opinion, was *La noche que raptaron a Epifania, o Shakespeare lo siento mucho*, directed by Ana Francis Mor. The first act was written by Gerardo Mancebo del Castillo Trejo, whose untimely death at only 30 years old both saddened Mexico's theatre world and left *Epifania* only half-finished. Mancebo del Castillo admirably captured the spirit of Shakespearian drama in the first act in elegant, antiquated syntax, in the creation of characters in the mode of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in a tangled, complex plot worthy of the British bard. Thus, the fact that Alfonso Cárcamo picked up where Mancebo del Castillo left off and wrote a coherent, seamless second act was nothing short of remarkable. In a nutshell, the play's plot involved the abduction of a postmodern supermodel and the consequences thereof. The author of the misdeed was Doña Chivos, "mandamás del Inframundo." Chivos had her transported from life to hell where she hoped to win Epifania over. Several characters went heroically to her rescue, battling through myriad obstacles in their quest. In the end, after numerous identity switches, battles of wit, journeys,

and introspection, the play ended as a traditional comedy – with not just one, but four weddings!

More important than the play's plot was its tone, which the program characterized as “rave escénico” and “ópera tecno.” Indeed, the play thrived on high energy, elaborately choreographed dance sequences set to frenetic techno-pop music, often accompanied by live singing from the actors. Costumes matched the techno-pop mode. In the first sequence, for example, all the actors wore white masks, white robes, white shoes, and had large white shopping bags. In subsequent scenes actors donned eye-catching, colorful costumes which suited their roles. The most prominent feature of the set, a fashion show runway, turned numerous characters into models. In a scene in which Chivos' henchmen bragged about how they abducted Epifania, for example, they interacted in a beautifully choreographed way, punctuated by occasional fashion walks down the runway. The rest of the set was a light colored backdrop with a set of doors which opened and closed like an elevator, and four doors which spun on a central vertical axis and matched the backdrop on one side while the other had mirrors. Thus multiple characters could move fluidly in and out of the action, and a simple turn of the four doors enhanced the image of a glamor-conscious world. Different colored lights bathed the backdrop at different points of the play, further immersing the audience in a sensory-rich environment.

The garish set of ten unique characters included the following: Epifania, who proclaimed herself narcissistic, a diva, in mourning for her own death, even as she donned a bright yellow dress, a green cape, high heels and a bright feather boa; Juana Nardos, who transported people down the Aqueronte river to hell, but played the part as an old western cowboy dressed in black leather, including a wide-brimmed hat, seemingly defying gravity by leaning backwards the entire play as if on horseback; Cruz and Guadalupe, heroic twins who switched identities during their quest, thus confusing just about everybody; and José Solón, a goofball fisherman who thought the twins were princesses and sought to marry them, but settled instead for a little wooden horse. Curiously, all parts were played by women actors, perhaps an inversion harkening back the days when men performed all the parts in Shakespeare's plays. All parts in this play were extremely demanding, requiring the ability to perform very technical dance sequences, sing live, walk the line between Shakespearian and techno-pop modes, and exhibit precise comic timing; all of the actors delivered stunning performances. *Epifania* was consummately intense, entertaining and dense, not just grilling

the fashion industry, but dealing with love, solitude, selfishness, pleasure, desire, courage, deception, perception, and identity.

The final masterpiece I witnessed belonged to the subgenre of children's theatre. *Garabatito*, written by Teresa Valenzuela and directed by Pablo Jaime, played to standing room only at Contigo America's small theatre. The enthusiastic reaction of the young spectators proved the play a success. The plot, three men helping a personified scribble turn into a cat, was merely a springboard launching the actors into numerous metatheatres. The play featured splendid animal costumes which did not approach realism, but provided charming, funny, unmistakable details to let the audience know of the animal's identity. One of the actors, Carlos Manuel Illescas, composed original music for the play, and along with his fellow actors sang, danced, did acrobatics, changed roles constantly, and exhibited expert corporal and verbal control. The set consisted of a cart, which the actors turned different ways and manipulated to create numerous different scenes – a farm, a circus, a flower garden, and even an underwater sequence. This was a high energy, marvelously creative visual and audio delight which swam successfully against the overwhelming current in Mexican children's theatre to stage only pieces coming from Disney movies or European fairy tales.



La cibernetica

Two plays written as exercises for acting students were performed admirably in the Foro del CUT (Centro Universitario de Teatro) at UNAM. *La cibernetica* was written Ilya Cazés, directed by Mauricio García Lozano, and performed by a cast billed as “Http://con la generación 1997-2001 del CUT.” The play cleverly dramatized three different “cyber” experiences: a chatroom, surfing the web, and a virtual reality machine. The chatroom scene was the most complex and the most accomplished. It consisted of five players: an actor suspended over the stage who represented the chatroom administrator/controller, two actors at computers, and two actors acting out the chats of the two at the computers. They spent most of their time in “Where are you?, Describe yourself, What do you do?” mode. Past those pleasantries, “Pepperoni” and “Bella 24” spoke more intimately in the “Utopía” chatroom, their projected personalities acting out every whim of their creators. Ultimately, spectators discovered that “Bella 24” was no more than a fictional woman’s identity created by the man at the computer stage right, while his female counterpart stage left had created a man’s identity. Chatrooms were portrayed as hotbeds for absurd, inane, and dishonest interchanges, punctuated by technical difficulties. In the internet-surfing scene, a video showed a young man surfing the net, while personifications of the items he called up on his computer appeared on stage. The main pages he accessed, and which spectators saw on stage, were 1) a page with poorly-translated tourist information about Mexico, 2) a page with a scheme about how to get rich quick, 3) a page offering spiritual help, 4) a sex page, and 5) a game page featuring superhero all-star wrestlers. As he accessed a new page, the other pages would go limp on the stage. The internet addict ordered and ate pizza, received and sent e-mail, and fought with his girlfriend over his addiction, at which point the superheroes saw what was happening in the outside world, climbed from cyberspace into reality, and finished the session upon breaking the screen. This sequence featured an avalanche of signs, but ultimately showed how vapid surfing the internet can become. In the third scene performers enclosed a volunteer from the audience in a white bag which led him through “virtual reality.” In advertising tones, they described the most mundane and then nightmarish of situations: preparing for work, riding the metro, then getting robbed, accused by the police, insulted and finally tortured. As the scene progressed, the “volunteer,” who was actually an actor, agonized inside the bag, experiencing the horrors to which they were subjecting him “virtually.” The irony, of course, was that reality can be dull or sordid or unpleasant, and we hardly need technology to lead us into it. *La cibernetica*

portrayed cyberspace as an empty sham too often inhabited by chaos, circus characters, and lack of communication. The actors passed their exam; their performances were excellent. This play tackled ultramodern scenarios in highly inventive ways.

The second Foro del CUT play, *Adictos anónimos*, written by Luis Mario Moncada and directed by Juliana Faesler and Clarissa Malheiros, was also a visually attractive play. In this case all the costumes and most of the props were based on the color red. Lacking a set per se, it used a number of chairs placed in a variety of arrangements to suggest different settings, the arranging of which became a part of the play's dazzling choreography. The text was really an extensive series of interpolated monologues by seven people addicted to various things: alcohol, tobacco, soap operas, physical exercise, religious fanaticism, drugs, and coffee. All of the characters recognized very clearly that they were addicted, but not one would admit to a problem – the thematic substance of the play was the astonishing denial in which people engage, and the impregnable walls of self-justification they build to ward off outside criticism. The ironies of their twisted logic, along with excellent timing, and high energy transitions between scenes all combined to very comic effect. The play's final image admirably captured its spirit of jocular insanity – an avalanche of red marbles tumbled across the stage.

Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's *Máscara vs. Cabellera*, with a focus on All-Star Wrestling, found its way to the stage of the old-time Teatro Blanquita in an incarnation directed by Benjamín Cann which departed drastically from Rascón Banda's text. The plot (wrestler Latin Lover took on the corrupt leaders of the wrestlers' union and lost his life as a result) was thoroughly overshadowed by a circus-like atmosphere because actual celebrity wrestlers played the wrestler roles, and because the play was framed by comic skits performed by several old-time comics such as César Bono, who posed (with microphones) as audience members and smart-mouthed throughout the play. As if at a circus rather than at a play, vendors snaked through the audience hawking popcorn, soft drinks, and candy. Between acts wrestlers posed for pictures with audience members. Many spectators wore wrestling masks. On the opening night, the large audience (roughly 700 people) had the further distraction of television news reporters, who did part of their report with glaring camera lights during the performance, as if at a sporting event. Perhaps they felt they could take such liberties because actors used an actual wrestling ring on the stage during several sequences. Despite the circus atmosphere and numerous technical sound and lighting problems,

Máscara vs. Cabellera had at its heart several themes critical to Mexico today (the cataclysm of corruption, the plight of common workers, and the need for heroes), all within a mode which reached out to the masses.



Salón de belleza

Salón de belleza, based on a novel written by Mario Bellatin, adapted by Alberto Chimal and Israel Cortés, and directed by Cortés, featured stunning visual imagery from even before the beginning of the play. As spectators entered the intimate space of UNAM's Sor Juana theatre, they passed under small bags of water hanging from the balcony, inside each of which was a live fish or some other item such as a chess piece. During the duration of the play a young man sat in a beauty chair and did not utter a word, while four other actors worked on him to make him beautiful in preparation for his death. And they chattered incessantly. They spoke mostly about their obsession with fish and beauty, but they also slipped in details about persecution their business had endured, their fatherless childhood, and they discussed death and helping their clients be beautiful at the moment of dying. As one beautician would work on the client, the others worked on imaginary clients, sometimes in surreally-contorted poses. The actors' work was unusual, admirably controlled, unfolding in slow motion, in highly studied choreography, and

requiring unearthly flexibility. The set was also unusual, with enormous two-way mirrors and a stage which could be illuminated from beneath. Costumes were eccentric as well; the beauticians wore white flowing robes over white corsets, with white arm coverings that snapped off, and had shorn heads that contrasted with long strands of sideburn hair. At play's end the client was dressed as a geisha. This idiosyncratic play made a beauty parlor into more than a place to seek beauty; it became the portal to the next life.

Secretos de la oscuridad was a rare foray into musical theatre written by a Mexican. Most musicals in Mexico City are imported from Broadway and have precious little to do with Mexican thematics. In this case, Alexandro Celia wrote and directed this musical which focused on police brutality, student uprisings, and the idea that no crime stays hidden forever. Despite the occasional incongruity of tunes breaking forth at dark moments, the music was moving, the actors' voices were excellent, and the topic was thoroughly Mexican. The play's actors, Jaime Rojas, Ricardo Villarreal, and Alejandro de la Madrid, were television stars, a fact to which I attributed the distinctively young female dominance of the audience. In the same Teatro Coyoacán, one of three theatres operated by the Sociedad General de Escitores Mexicanos (SOGEM), a comedy on a similar dark Mexican topic was performed on a different day of the week. *Mónica y el profesor*, written by Nacho Méndez and directed by Héctor Bonilla, has enjoyed a very successful run of over a year. The simple plot followed the 20-day relationship between a young woman from a very rich family and a Marxist professor, forced to share a squalid abandoned basement room after being abducted. The first act seemed to be tackling many of Mexico's most enduring problems: corruption, abductions, religion, hypocrisy, the chasm between the rich and the poor, and the need for heroes, among others. The culture clash between the two and their efforts to make sense of their ordeal, survive, help each other, and escape provided ample fodder for hilarity. Thus, the first act seemed to have laid the groundwork for a masterpiece in Mexican theatre, but the second act deteriorated into a sexual relationship between the two and lost its transcendence albeit while keeping its mirth.

The Casa del Teatro has been re-energized and is posed to host another cycle of "Teatro Clandestino" in the fall. During this season it housed a series of monologues and children's theatre on the weekends. For example, Elea Barcena performed a memorable monologue based on Elena Poniatowska's short novel *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*. Barcena's performance captured the depth of despair and loneliness which Diego Rivera's

Russian lover Angelina Beloff suffered after losing their baby and being abandoned by Rivera in their Paris apartment. *El abuelo ya no duerme en el armario* was a children's piece adapted by Cecilia Constantino from a story by Silvia Molina. Antonio Algarra played the part of a grandfather who would visit his grandson to make up for lack of parenting from the boy's parents, who were too busy working to buy him toys and would bicker with each other rather than pay him attention. This play had some unfortunate lulls, indulged in narrating rather than representing, and had an incongruent set of toys for a 12-year old, but tackled the crucial issues for Mexico of child alienation, the need for effective parenting, the blight of consumerism, and the value of extended family.

El sueño de Juana continued Francisco de Hoyos' campaign to take theatre about prominent figures in Mexican history to young people. Written and directed by de Hoyos, the play focused on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's battles with 17th century civic and religious authorities. It stressed ideas from Mexico's past which are crucial to its present, such as the use and abuse of power, the place of women in society, and the value of learning and writing. The Teatro X Teatro group also focused on high school student audiences, but performed classics from world authors. The group's rendition of Molière's *El cornudo imaginario* was first-class in its acting and set design, and functioned well as a hook to encourage young people to enjoy theatre. Their performances of a shortened *Edipo Rey* and *Lisístrata* were likewise excellent. Fitting to the type of theatre and its audience, before each play the director lectured the audience briefly on the author, the play, and its relevance to them. This not only educated the audience and piqued their interest, but also calmed them down.

Finally, the Utopía Urbana group continues to do excellent street theatre far from the commercial and avant-garde venues of the city. I saw them perform *Primero fueron las aves* in circumstances most actors would shudder to tackle. The non-luxury bus which delivered them to the outdoor plaza of the performance in Tlahuac was late, and the actors had to dress and put on their make up during the ride. The outdoor stage was separated from the audience, so the actors had to compete with noise from the neighborhood, including the sounds of a spirited soccer game which sent a ball into the crowd at one point during the performance. Wind blew dust into the audience's eyes and some of the props off the stage. A pair of dogs scuffled nearby and had to be separated. Despite all this, the group performed Roberto Vázquez's play admirably, delivering a message about minimizing litter and pollution.

Among the most compelling features of the play were the involved costumes and swirling, swaying performances of Gustavo Burgos (Smog Mog), Olimpia Zárraga (Ceniza), and Diazmín Mazaba (Imeca). Performed as part of a celebration commemorating the 19th anniversary of the founding of an organization which has helped the poor of Tlahuac to secure affordable housing (USCOVI), an audience of well over 100 braved the elements and responded enthusiastically to this volunteer performance by a group true to its commitment to take theatre to the masses.

Mexico City's theatre world seems to continue to draw on endless reserves of creativity and an enormous will to perform. It should be noted that more and more playtexts are finding their way into print in Mexico City as well. During the spring season Ediciones El Milagro (correo@edicioneselmilagro.com.mx) unveiled its newest anthology, *El nuevo teatro II*, which includes ten plays by playwrights born since 1959 and another by one born in 1948. This is their fourth in a series of anthologies of "new" Mexican plays, in addition to a series of individually packaged plays. Similarly, Editorial Tablado IberoAmericano (feldejgaro@hotmail.com) recently released the first volume of an anthology of Arturo Amaro's plays, which comes on the heels of *Teatro, mujer y país*, with its 10 plays by Mexican dramaturgas, and follows in the footsteps of Tablado's excellent anthologies of "Pastorelas" and "Teatro del '68." Indeed, in both performance and in published texts Mexican theatre shows every sign of thriving.³

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Notes

¹ In 1994, INBA's schools of dance and theatre moved into spacious, new facilities in the enormous "Centro Nacional de las Artes" (albeit with many architectural blunders, reportedly due to a frantic planning and building pace to satisfy the "Edifice Complex" of the outgoing Salinas de Gortari administration). The abandoned Chapultepec theatres continued to function even though they were already badly in need of updating.

² As in prior season reviews, I feel a need to point out that I did not see all of Mexico City's plays during the season in focus. With several hundred plays advertised during the season (while others ran un-advertised), no one could have seen them all! (Nor would anyone have wanted to!) This report features the best of what I was able to see. Although I sought almost exclusively plays by Mexican playwrights, many people assured me that the performances of a number of plays by non-Mexican playwrights were absolute masterpieces, including *Copenhagen* (written by Michael Frayn and directed by Mario Espinosa), *Siete puertas* (by Botho Strauss and directed by Luis de Tavira), and a distinctive version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* directed by Juliana Faesler with an all-women cast.

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