

## A Nineteenth-Century Mexican Acting Company— Teatro de Iturbide: 1856-57

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Despite rising interest in the United States, the Mexican theatre remains little more than a cipher to most of us. There are two primary reasons for this: one, the extant scholarship is written almost entirely in Spanish, thus preventing many from reading it and, two, scarcely any research has been done on the history of Mexican theatre; moreover, that which has deals almost exclusively with its historic drama as a more or less quaint prelude to its modern offspring.<sup>1</sup> Questions concerning stage production have rarely been raised and then only in rather general terms. The standard history of Mexican theatre is Enrique Olavarría y Ferrari's *Reseña histórica del teatro en México* published originally in 1895 and reissued in 1961. This four-volume study appeared initially as a serial in *El Nacional* from 1880-84 and was directed at the general reader rather than the specialist in history or theatre. Although much of his material is legendary, second-hand, and empirical, *Reseña histórica* remains an important source work and a respected document, but one which must be corroborated from other sources. Among the best of the corroborative sources is *El teatro en 1857 y sus antecedentes* (México, 1956) by Luis Reyes de la Maza.<sup>2</sup> Herein he has collected in chronological order playbills, advertisements, feature articles, and reviews from the periodical press of Mexico City during the years 1810 to 1910. Since such data form virtually the only evidence now available to students of Mexican theatrical history, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of Reyes de la Maza's contribution. Consequently, this study leans heavily upon his work.

It is, of course, impossible in this paper to cover so vast a topic as Mexican theatrical production in the nineteenth century; consequently, I propose to treat one crucial element in production—the acting company—which in turn will cast light upon production practices in general. Even the "acting company," however, is too broad a subject; hence, my focus is further narrowed to cover only the company which occupied the Teatro de Iturbide during the season of 1856-57.

There are, besides the fact that this is a particularly interesting enterprise, two other reasons for confining the study to only one troupe which seem to be persuasive: (1) for purposes of clarity, it is best to treat in detail only one company which is more or less typical of all; and (2) since the Iturbide broke the monopoly of the Teatro Nacional when it opened in 1856, it generated considerable press coverage; hence, more information is available about this theatre than most others.<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of 1856, the Mexican theatre—at least, that part of it resident in Mexico City—labored under the monopoly of the Gran Teatro Nacional, the only theatre which offered first-class drama and opera to the respectable public. There were other places of entertainment which were esthetically marginal and which offered fare ranging from circus to vaudeville (“*carpas*”).<sup>4</sup> Aside from a few names of performers and attractions, we know very little about these theatres. We know considerably more, however, about the Nacional; it was operated by the two Mosso brothers in such a high-handed manner that it not only alienated members of the company, but audiences as well. During the previous year, for example, the Mossos had engaged Matilde Diez, “the pearl of the Spanish theatre,” and her company at mid-season and displaced a number of their most popular actors from the bill. Audiences, while pleased with Diez, still resented the arbitrariness of the management. Of course, the actors were also resentful. Consequently, it is no surprise to find that the company of the new Iturbide was composed of many former members of the Nacional, nor that the public was quite interested in the new theatre. Señor G. Alfaro, writing of the Iturbide in *El Omnibus*, reflected the general enthusiasm and high hopes for the Iturbide when he said: “this is the company which promises us nights of more enjoyment in the most beautiful Iturbide Theatre; with the great talents of the actors given roles in expressive dramas, there can be no doubt that the performances will always be splendid.”<sup>5</sup> Alfaro and his readers knew that the most accomplished and respected actors in Mexico, with one or two exceptions, had left the Nacional and joined the Iturbide.<sup>6</sup>

One of the reasons for the flight to the Iturbide appears to have been a desire of its management to give the company an opportunity to work in relative freedom. Francisco Arbeu, the proprietor of the Iturbide and former contributor to the building of the Nacional, made this declaration in a handbill which was reprinted in *El Siglo XIX*:

Finally, I have the pleasure to announce to the cultured public of the capital, the inauguration of the Teatro de Iturbide next Carnival. This building, brought to realization through much labor and suffering, can only justify itself by bringing pleasure to its audiences. I flatter myself moreover to think that it will do so by opening its doors to all artists to work in all forms of art, and also by bringing to its audience the double bonus of excellence in production and moderate prices.<sup>7</sup>

In order to realize these aims, Arbeu not only organized an efficient management, but set out to construct a beautiful and well-equipped building as well. He provided the funds for it; commissioned the young architect Santiago Méndez to

design and supervise the work; and employed Manuel Serrano, formerly with the Nacional, to decorate the structure both inside and out, paint the scenery, and oversee the preparation of spectacle during the season.<sup>8</sup> José Rafael de Oropesa, however, was in charge of the day-to-day management and, although in the absence of more evidence it is impossible to know, may have been either the lessee of the building or a partner of Arbeu.<sup>9</sup> However that may be, it is clear that Oropesa became the leading figure (*empresario*) in the management before the season opened. He published over his signature the prospectus of the company, a document required by law of the management for the benefit of a theatre's patrons to insure that, when they purchased a multiple-admission ticket, they knew what they were to receive.<sup>10</sup> In addition the list of plays to be presented, curtain times, and prices of admission, the prospectus also set down the rules and regulations which governed the company. Some of these provide interesting insights into managerial policy.<sup>11</sup>

First of all, after describing the commodious auditorium and services to be provided for the spectators, Oropesa says of his company:

The dramatic company brings together a number of well known, talented, and beloved performers. In order to be employed, an actor had to demonstrate his merit through past performance before discriminating audiences, in plays which were well known, in a wide variety of roles, and with critical acclaim. I can assure you, it is the best in the capital and in all the Americas.<sup>12</sup>

Having formed his troupe, Oropesa assured his public that "no actor or actress will be admitted to the company during the season on the basis of petitions of any sort." Thus, the quality of performance was guaranteed for the season against "cronism," a complaint common at that time toward the Nacional's policy.

High quality performance depends upon more than prohibitions—for example, effective organization. Oropesa employed Rosendo Laimon as "Autor de la compañía," a post which in this case corresponds to that of producer in the contemporary theatre. In the absence of the contractual arrangements between Laimon and Oropesa, it is impossible to be certain of the autor's precise purview or function. There are, nonetheless, certain tentative conclusions which appear warranted by the organizational structure as published in the prospectus. First, Laimon is placed above Manuel Fabre, José de Mata (the directors and first actors) and Luis Pavía and Tomás Villanueva (directors of dance and choreography) who were charged with preparing the dance performances. Laimon was also above José María Chávez, the conductor of the orchestra, Manuel Serrano, the scene painter, and a master of the wardrobe, who may also have designed and built costumes.<sup>13</sup> It is evident, therefore, that Laimon's task was to oversee all areas of preparation and to see that each achieved the desired result. Moreover, since he was also the prompter, he had a hand in performance as well. It does not follow from this, however, that a unified style of production developed under Laimon or that he was even able to synthesize the elements of production into a coordinated whole. It simply indicates that, to some extent, the Iturbide main-

tained a centralized control over production.<sup>14</sup> He was assisted by Mariano Candil, the stage manager and master machinist.

The actors themselves were listed in the prospectus by lines of business—i.e., types of character played.<sup>15</sup> The leading roles were played by Fabre, Mata and señoras María Cañete and Manuela Francesconi. Ingenue (*dama joven*) and understudy to the leading ladies was Josefa García, who was aided in ingenue roles by Doña Pilar Pavía (“*primera dama joven*”). Opposite them were Angel Padilla and José Villanueva, juvenile leads (*galanes jóvenes*). The leading character actors were Cruz Salazar (“*característica*”) and Antonio Castro (“*actor genérico*”).

The second-line parts were played by señoras María de los Remedios Amador, Paz Dorado, and Antonia Menocal; and señores Bernardino Rodríguez and Merced Morales. Third-line parts, exclusively male, were performed by Amador Santa Cruz, Andrés Montañez, Luis Moron, Manuel Munilla, and Vicente Cortés.

A relatively large number of supernumeraries filled out the dramatic company: señoras Manuela Carrillo, Mariana Martínez, “N.N.,” and “N.N.,” and señores Juan Morary, Juan Martínez, “N.N.,” and “N.N.”<sup>16</sup> There were also understudies (*sobresalientes*) appointed by the management: Andrés Caballero and Ignacio Ocampo, both of whom also assisted Laimon as prompters at times.

The dance company was organized into first and second dancers and the corps de ballet. First dancers included two ladies—Mercedes and Francisca Pavía—and two gentlemen—Luis Pavía and Tomás Villanueva. Don Francisco Pavía, the character dancer (*bailarín de carácter*), was considered among the leading dancers as well. Secondary parts were performed by Paz Dorado and Antonia Menocal who, it will be remembered, were also in the dramatic company. The corps de ballet, composed of the same persons listed above as supernumeraries, did double duty which is perhaps an interesting comment on the training of actors and the relative weakness of the corps de ballet or, perhaps, the reverse. Most of the leading and supporting dancers had been with the Nacional the previous season, but like many of their colleagues among the actors had joined the Iturbide in 1856.

The composition and organization of the Iturbide’s company determined in large measure the nature of its operation. Three particularly significant aspects of this bear investigation: a) lines of business, b) large repertory of roles, c) dominance of comic actors in company. First, because actors were hired to play lines of business (that is, play a certain type of character in all productions), performances were necessarily disparate in style. After all, the actor’s responsibility was to his line of business, not to the play or to other actors. The art of acting was, in a sense, above the drama it represented; the actor conceived of his role, not as an instrument to bring the play to life, but as an opportunity to display his skills as a performer. This is evident in the press reviews where invariably the performance is evaluated in terms of an individual actor’s successes and failures in his line of business.

We see Fabre, the elegant and amiable actor who knows well how to interpret the tender emotions of the heart and whose presence on stage is always greeted by tempestuous applause. He knows how to capture men who

judge art intellectually as well as women who judge it emotionally. With the exception of Hermosilla, no one has ever gained the triumphs that Fabre has for his elegance of bearing, irreproachable declamation, and all his good comic spirits.<sup>17</sup>

Although this review is ostensibly dealing with *¿Y para qué?*, it might be about any of Fabre's performances. With few exceptions, the play, when mentioned at all, was evaluated separately from the production and as work of literature. Writing of *¿Y para qué?*, Alfaro continues:

We do not know the play, but it is not necessary to read if one has seen it. It convinces us that there are a number of well-written scenes in it. The versification is always sonorous and fluid; the plot, except in the first two acts, is perfectly written in the third and fourth.

José Pruneda, another reviewer for *El Omnibus*, disagreed with Alfaro about the play's quality; he said:

*¿Y para qué?* This is the title of the drama which opened the Iturbide theatre and it is one of those tear-jerkers which generally displease our audiences. One is, therefore, moved to ask "¿Y para qué?" [What for?] do you waste your time don Pantaleón Tovar [the dramatist] in composing such horrifying dramas when comedies of manners and Bretonian comedies are so enthusiastically received. I may be wrong, but I believe that one good comedy is better than any number of mediocre dramas which force the audience to listen to two mortal hours of declamation and soliloquizing by the actors. We beg the management, therefore, to economize by reducing the number of such plays to one or two a year and we will be eternally grateful.<sup>18</sup>

There is no word about the performances here at all, although inferences may be drawn from his vivid phrase of "two mortal hours." Be that as it may, the actors and their performances were seen, by themselves and others, as compendiums of stage business and skills related to a certain type of character. The actor was not judged for his work in one of these roles except insofar as that work reflected his strengths and weaknesses in all like roles which he played.

There are many reasons for this attitude, one of which brings us to the second aspect of organizational influence on stage practice: the large number of roles played by one actor during a single season. Lines of business allowed an actor to play many parts on short notice since in each he used more or less the same basic techniques and methods as in the others.<sup>19</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the company was not only able but willing to change the evening's bill frequently. The diminutive size of the audience was also a causal factor in this practice since the theatres had to attract the relatively small number of spectators back at least twice a week—more often if possible—to fill the auditorium. To change the bill was one of the most successful ways of doing this. Nevertheless, it would have been impossible to do so, if the actors had not had their roles ready on short notice. Perhaps this was making a virtue of necessity, but it is quite

clear that the organization of the company and the exigencies of management mutually reinforced one another.

The third influence of company organization on theatrical practice lies in the strength of the actors in comic lines of business. They could and did play serious roles, but (if Pruneda is any judge) they did not do them well; hence, most of the productions staged at the Iturbide were comedies.

As a result of such organization influences together with the demands and expectations of the public, rehearsal time was quite short, by modern standards. Fabre and Mata, the directors of the company, were charged with preparing the actors for performance. The bills indicate a relatively even division of these duties; Mata is credited with staging twenty plays and Fabre with seventeen. Yet the season offered 127 main pieces (i.e., there were 127 changes of bill; some were old favorites in every actor's repertory such as *Don Juan Tenorio*, and others were revivals. None of these apparently required direction).<sup>20</sup> It should be remembered that the only evidence with respect to whether a play was directed and by whom lies in the playbills and advertisements. Hence, the absence of a direction credit indicates one of two situations: one, the play was so familiar that no direction was warranted; or, two, that the directorial effort was so minimal, for any number of reasons, that no special credit was warranted.<sup>21</sup> Still, a fairly casual attitude toward preparation emerges from all this against which what few facts we have about rehearsal stand out in better focus.

We know, first of all, that the directors—Mata and Fabre—were charged with rehearsals for some 37 productions. Although we do not know their precise duties, it seems reasonable to assume they were concerned exclusively with acting and actors. The other departments—orchestra, scenery, lights, costumes—were headed by men who, in the prospectus, are equal to the directors. Moreover, these departments are largely divorced in their activities from the acting. That is, the orchestra, for example, while perhaps accompanying the actors in incidental songs and mood music, garnered all of its critical praise from the overtures. The scenery and costumes were judged on the basis of historical (rather than "dramatic") "accuracy" or "appropriateness."<sup>22</sup> There is no evidence that the directors had any voice in these matters. Indeed the presence of an autor—Laimon—indicates he had the responsibility for whatever coordination occurred among the various departments.

Secondly, all 37 pieces which had direction were new plays, but apparently not all new plays had directors; *Vasco Nuñez de Balboa* (opened 14 September 1856) is a case in point, but this was an exception since most new pieces had direction credit in the bill. No doubt someone was in charge of getting even the stock plays ready for performance, but it seems likely that this process was a relatively cursory one.

Without prompt books, any conclusion about rehearsal or performance must be tentative, but there are intriguing clues which appear in the press of the period. One such is the occasional reference in advertisements to the fact that a play was in rehearsal and would be performed in a few days. This announcement, for example, appeared in a bill dated 1 May 1856: "a performance of *El caballero del milagro* is being prepared for the 4th of May."<sup>23</sup> It is impossible to determine how long that piece had already been in rehearsal when the an-

nouncement was made, but *María Rosa*, a three-act drama, had opened on the 27th of April and a five-act comic drama opened on the 1st of May, *Gabriela de Belle-Isle*. One assumes, therefore, the company must have been occupied to some extent with rehearsals for these plays before 1 May which left only some three days of concentrated rehearsal before the opening of *El caballero del milagro*.<sup>24</sup> Nor is this an isolated example; *El bufón del rey* (note in advertisement 14 May and play opened on 18 May) and *30 años o la vida de un jugador* (advertisement dated 14 November announced rehearsals and the play opened on 16 May) are other cases. On occasion, however, a piece would be announced as in rehearsal and then never reach performance; there is at least one case of this—*La libertad de Florencia* (announcement dated 20 November 1856) and there may have been others which were cancelled in rehearsal. Given the frequent changes in bill, there were never more than a few days for rehearsal for any one play and since some members of the company doubled as dancers—and the dance bill changed as often as the dramatic bill—it must have been rare to have all members of either company together for rehearsal. It is likely that more than one piece was in rehearsal at a time making even more diffuse the efforts of the actors, indeed, forcing them to rely upon their individual talents, methods, and techniques to build performances rather than upon the development of an ensemble style. That is certainly the implication of reviews such as the following:

“La señora Cañete, the protagonist of the play, sustained the character of a wife who is crushed under the burden of a dissolute life with mastery and talent. She portrayed tiredness, fatigue, and martyrdom of conscience with cries of growing intensity. She is every bit as powerful on the stage today as she was in 1843. She deserves the public acclamation she always receives.”<sup>25</sup>

Of course, this description could well apply to a number of roles played by señora Cañete. Juan Mateos, reviewer for *El Monitor*, confirms the individuality of Cañete's style:

Señora Cañete, the congenial María Cañete who has achieved so many triumphs on our stage, continues in her dominant style, sets the pace for the epoch, and her dramatic talent does not let her down, nor will it even to the end of her days in the theatre. In the role of Lola she was sublime, particularly in the last act in which she dies. . . .<sup>26</sup>

To some extent, no doubt, these assessments are impressionistic, but this does not alter their validity as evidence of the nature of acting at the Iturbide and, in a larger sense, acting at the other theatres as well. As one looks at the season as a whole, the necessity of such an acting style becomes obvious.

The season, which opened on 25 March 1856 and closed on 20 February 1857, saw the production of 127 main pieces, of which 61 were comedies, 49 were dramas, and 12 were ballets. The length of run for each, since many were revived during the season, was an average of two days; although some had only a single performance, others ran longer. The longest run, at any event, was *El cuello de una camisa* which opened 5 December 1856 and closed 13 December (eight performances).

The season was divided into sub-seasons called "abonos" each of which was composed of twelve performances ("funciones regulares") and a number of extraordinary presentations such as concerts or masques.<sup>27</sup> Multiple admission tickets could be purchased for the sub-season, although apparently not for the entire season. The prices for a sub-season were 28 pesos for eight seats in a box; 26 pesos for six in the amphitheatre, 18 pesos for four in the amphitheatre; 4.4 pesos for one seat in a box; and the same for one in the pit; 2.4 pesos for a seat in the first gallery and 2 pesos for one in the second. These sums gave the purchaser twelve admissions during the sub-season and represented a considerable savings over the single admission price which was 6 pesos for a box (eight seats), 6 pesos for six seats in the amphitheatre and 4 pesos for four, 1 peso for a seat in the "segundo piso" (lit., second floor), 1.1 peso for a seat in the pit, 3 centavos for the first gallery and 2 for the second.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the bargain prices offered by the Iturbide, it did not attract a large following immediately. The reviewer in the *Pensamiento Nacional* reported that, "although the scenery and illumination were good, the orchestra was weak and the audience small." He concludes his remarks by lamenting, "clearly, there is no great enthusiasm in Mexico for dramatic performance."<sup>29</sup> Matters were perhaps worse at the Nacional, however, since the government granted the impresarios of that theatre 70,000 pesos to subsidize its productions.<sup>30</sup> At least one person at the time hoped that the government, in the interests of fair play and dramatic art, would also grant the Iturbide a stipend, but it did not do so.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, audiences began to support the Iturbide by the end of April. No doubt the attendance of the President of the Republic, Ignacio Comonfort, on several occasions brought many who would not otherwise have gone to the theatre. In any case, *El Monitor* said of one performance which the President attended: "Last evening occurred a special performance at the Iturbide dedicated by the management to the President of the Republic, the National Army, and the National Guard. The building's interior and exterior were illuminated brilliantly and with taste; the audience was numerous. . . ."<sup>32</sup>

The bill which the audience saw that night was much like the standard bill. The evening began at 8:00 p.m. with the orchestra, a talented and respected group of musicians, playing a brief concert. Frequently the music was composed especially for the performance, but occasionally old favorites were played. For the Presidential Gala, the national march ("in order to announce the President when he arrives . . .") and second, "a well-known and popular overture." This was followed by the premier of Auset's comedy of manners, *Innocent Tricks* (*Trampas inocentes*) in three acts. A ballet featuring the Paviás succeeded the comedy and afterward the evening ended with a one-act farce entitled "E.H." Although this is a typical bill, during the season there were minor changes in arrangement. By and large, however, the bill remained quite stable: music, the main pieces (usually a three to five-act comedy, drama, or ballet), and one or two afterpieces. The afterpieces, more often than not, were performed by the dance company; it was not unusual to find a ballet on the bill three nights a week. No doubt, given the strength of his "compañía de baile," Oropesa believed he could rely upon them to please consistently. He was not, however, entirely correct in his assumption: the reviewer for *El Panorama*, for example,



suggested that the management of the Iturbide did not enjoy the sympathy of the public because the productions consistently violated the established convention of inviolable separation of audience and actor. This flaw, he said, could be overlooked; however, he could not overlook the absence of short, comic afterpieces from the bills and the presence there of a seemingly unending series of dance pieces, all of which were largely alike and, hence, diverted the audience less and less.<sup>33</sup> Whatever the merits of this observation, Oropesa retained ballets on the bills and the number performed did not diminish through the remainder of the season.

During the early months of the regime (from March to June), performances were offered only at night. In early June 1856, however, Oropesa initiated matinees instead of evening performances. This placed the Iturbide in competition with the lesser theatres (such as the Nuevo México and Oriente) which performed during the afternoons. This might have been an attempt to avoid continuing competition with the Nacional; if so, it did not succeed because immediately the Nacional added matinees to its offerings.<sup>34</sup> On 9 June, the Iturbide reverted to evening performances and on 14 June it added matinees to the regular evening performances. From that date on, the Iturbide offered one or two matinees a week in addition to six evening performances.

During the summer and early fall, the Iturbide apparently remained full or nearly so, but by November audiences had grown apathetic and their numbers declined. The reviewer for *El Panorama* reported on 2 November that the bill offered something of interest (apparently an unusual happening recently); the first play, “. . . a comedy of manners, is a most beautiful composition . . . perfectly performed by la Cañete, Fabre, Mata, and Castro. The distinguished Fabre was in his element that night and he received numerous plaudits for his interesting and difficult role.” The second play, *The Night of the Dance*, was called “a pretty drama,” with respect to the scenery and costumes, rather than the acting, although the reviewer admits that the performance “was good in almost all parts, especially la señora Cañete who gave the best performance of the night.” The third play was an unmitigated disaster in the opinion of the reviewer—he said he would rather not say anything about it, despite its obvious popularity among the lower segments of the audience “who like that sort of play [farce].” The actors had been called before the curtain by their enthusiastic admirers after the performance.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the month, despite this flurry of interest, audiences declined in numbers. The reasons for the decline are not easy to determine: depending on whom one reads, the cause was the boring dances, the absence of farce from the bill, or the impertinence of the actors.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, reports of smaller audiences continue: on 30 November, *El Panorama* reports, “they [the actors at the Iturbide] continue to give performances before an ever declining number of spectators.”

The management continued the struggle until 17 December when the benefits began. Rosendo Laimon took the first one on that date. He was followed by Angel Padilla (27 December), Mercedes Pavía (3 January 1857), Cruz Salazar (7 January), Remedios Amador and Merced Morales (joint benefit, 14 January), María Cañete (21 January), Manuel Fabre (28 January), Juan de Mata (4 February), Pilar Pavía (9 February), Antonio Castro (14 February), Francisca

and Luis Pavía (joint benefit, 17 February), Mariano Candil (a two-day benefit on 18 and 19 February for which *The Mysteries of Paris* was divided into two parts and played on consecutive nights), and the benefit season ended with a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on 20 February 1857 of which Francisco Arbeu was the beneficiary.

Shortly afterward, a notice appeared in *El Diario de Avisos* under the heading, "monopoly of the theatres":

In the session [of the municipal government] of 27 March [1857], señor Ibarrola announced that the monopoly of the theatres had been re-established . . . Señor Barreda revealed that señor Oropesa had taken both the Iturbide and the Nacional and, consequently, the municipal authorities must take proper steps to regulate this enterprise.<sup>37</sup>

During the ensuing season, Oropesa employed a single dramatic company (centered around his four leading actors—Fabre, Mata, Cañete, and Castro) which he used at both major theatres, a situation which, for students of English theatre, is reminiscent of the policy of Alfred Bunn during his tenure at Covent Garden and Drury Lane earlier in the century. Oropesa was no more successful than Bunn in that his actors rebelled and the company, one of the more talented the capital had even seen, fell apart at the end of the season.

It is not a simple matter to evaluate the contributions of the Iturbide during its brief autonomy. Perhaps the most significant one is the forced retirement of the brothers Mosso from the management of the Nacional. Their arbitrary policies toward both audiences and artists were indeed an obstacle to the development of theatrical and dramatic art in Mexico, but whether Oropesa's subsequent policies were better, aside from being beyond the scope of this paper, is at least debatable. Nevertheless, Oropesa was an innovative and effective manager to the extent that he brought together and maintained an outstanding company of actors, gave them a degree of autonomy under Laimon, and made a financial success of the venture, if his leasing of the Nacional is any indication. Whether he arrived at this policy alone or in collaboration with Francisco Arbeu must remain for the present an unanswered question, but it would seem that Oropesa was the guiding force.

In many ways the troupe was typical of acting companies at the other theatres in Mexico. The financial basis of the company, for example, consisted of an unknown, but substantial, sum of invested capital which was controlled by Arbeu; he constructed the building and fitted it out with the necessary implements of theatrical production (i.e., scenery, gas lights, and a wardrobe). These were probably leased to Oropesa under terms which must have given him a large degree of autonomy in matters related to repertory, bill, and the organization of the company. Under Oropesa's regime, Rosendo Laimon, the producer, appears to have been in charge of coordinating the various production elements (e.g., acting, scenery, costumes, props, and lighting) to bring to the stage an esthetically pleasing whole. This managerial arrangement, though similar to others, was essentially more effective as a result of the division of authority among these three. Each, therefore, was able to supervise his area of responsibility more closely than was the case at other theatres.

There were, however, structural preconditions imposed on production by the company's organization and operation. These were, (a) the actors were able to work only in preconceived lines of business, a fact which tended to conventionalize both rehearsal and performance; (b) given the frequent change in bill—together with the acting conventions—rehearsal time was severely curtailed by modern standards; hence, (c) preparation was quite perfunctory by modern standards, even though those involved, both on and off the stage, deemed it adequate.

Scenery and, to a much lesser extent, costumes were designed and executed by Manuel Serrano and perhaps others. Spectacle tended to have its own conventional demands which were largely separate from those of any particular play. A stock of scenery served the needs of many plays and was praised by critics, not because it related directly to the play, but because it was—in itself—beautiful, historically accurate, or in some other way evocative.<sup>38</sup> Costumes, although designed on at least one occasion, were usually purchased by the actor to enhance his appearance on stage. As long as managements were willing to tolerate this practice, costumes would be the weakest link in the production chain. Very little mention of costumes is made in the press.

Like most aspects of the Mexican theatre, the composition of the acting company was rather stable. On the positive side, this contributed to continuity in personnel during a season and made the actor somewhat more secure in his position than he otherwise might have been. Furthermore, the fact that many of the same actors who had appeared in the 1856-57 season at the Iturbide continued in that company the next season may well be an indication that the contracts were for a two-year period.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, rigidity tends to produce boredom, as certain press reports indicated was the case at the Iturbide.

Having enunciated those aspects which the Iturbide's troupe shared with most others, it is necessary to mention its unique characteristics as well. To begin with, the Mexican theatre was an actor's theatre during the 19th century; and, with two exceptions—Ignacio Servín and Matilde Diez—all of the first-rate actors in the capital were associated with the Iturbide. As a consequence, it was considerably stronger than its rivals. Its success, therefore, was almost inevitable. Second, and this can only be tentatively inferred from Oropesa's success, the management of the Iturbide was much stronger, more insightful with respect to actors and spectators than its principal rivals—the Mossos. It is apparent that the enterprise at the Iturbide had certain advantages in terms of personnel over other companies with which it competed, but its structure was in most respects identical to that of the others. The crucial difference between the Iturbide and the others, therefore, was its capable management. It was unfortunate that Oropesa was not able to keep his company together after its second season, both for his management and the Mexican theatre.

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## Notes

1. See Armando María y Campos, *Archivos de teatro* (México, 1959) and Antonio Magaña Esquivel and Ruth Lamb, *Breve historia del teatro mexicano* (México, 1958).

2. Reyes de la Maza has subsequently published other volumes in his history of Mexican theatre; they include: *El teatro en México con Lerdo y Díaz, 1873-1879* (México, 1963); *El teatro en México durante el porfiriato* (México, 1964), 3 vol.; *El teatro en México durante el Segundo Imperio, 1862-1867* (México, 1959); *El teatro en México durante la Independencia, 1810-39* (México, 1969); *El teatro en México en la época de Juárez, 1868-1872* (México, 1961); *El teatro en México entre la reforma y el Imperio, 1858-1861* (México, 1958).

3. Even so, Willis Knapp Jones in his book, *Behind Spanish-American Footlights* (Austin, 1961), the only source in English which mentions the Iturbide, is in error when he asserts "In 1857 the Iturbide was acquired and closed by El Teatro Nacional, to reduce competition" (p. 480). First, the Iturbide was not closed; second, not the Iturbide, but the Nacional was "acquired" by Oropesa, the manager of the former house. This is indicative of the sad state of our knowledge regarding this enterprise.

4. Five such theatres were open at some time during the season: the Oriente, Nuevo México, de la Esmeralda (all of which were open only three days a week; the last was a circus while the Oriente and Nuevo México specialized in variety entertainments although they did produce occasional plays), the de los Gallos, and the del Relox (both open just one day per week).

5. 19 March 1856.

6. Only Ignacio Servín and Diez remained at the elder house and after the opening of the opera season—19 October 1856—Diez left to resume her tour of the hemisphere.

7. 3 February 1856.

8. *Ibid.*

9. He says in the prospectus that, as had been the case during his regime at the Teatro Principal in 1845, he would bear all the expenses of the Iturbide's season and would be in sole control of it ("a mis solas expensas, y con mi sola combinación"). Prospectus reprinted in Reyes de la Maza, p. 233. Olavarría y Ferrari confirms this in *Reseña histórica del teatro mexicano*, I, 433.

10. The Theatre Regulation Act of 1846 (amended 1853), Article 15, imposed upon the management the responsibility to present to all *abonados* (season ticket holders) what the theatre proposed to offer in terms of the company personnel, the plays, the order and dates in and on which they would be produced.

Article 16 prohibited any deviation from the published prospectus under penalty of a 50 peso fine for the first offense, 100 pesos for the second, and 200 for the third. See Christopher Stowell, *Reglamento teatral en México hasta 1917* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1968), p. 516.

11. See Reyes de la Maza, pp. 232-37 for complete prospectus.

12. Reyes de la Maza, p. 234.

13. Unfortunately, we do not have his name. In an advertisement printed in *El Siglo XIX* (29 March 1856), however, there is a note to the effect that the costumes were specially designed for a production of *Achaques de la vejez*.

14. This was not unique to the Iturbide; the Gran Teatro Nacional also had an *autor* (i.e., producer)—Manuel Moreno, who also performed some, if not all, of the tasks of empresario as well. Laimon had held the post at the Gran Nacional for some years prior to 1856 and was one of the most competent producers in Mexico during the 1850's and 1860's. Aside from the Iturbide and the Gran Nacional, however, no other company employed an *autor*, *per se*.

15. Among the actors employed by Oropesa for the Iturbide were two who had been members of his company at the Principal during the 1844-45 season: Amador Santa Cruz and Manuela Francesconi. See Olavarría y Ferrari, I, 433.

16. Reyes de la Maza informs the present writer in a letter dated 27 December 1971 that the initials "N.N." stand for "no necesario," i.e., personnel to be added to the company as the plays made necessary. Unfortunately, additions to the company during the season were not announced in the press and, therefore, are not known.

17. G. Alfaro, *El Omnibus*, 10 March 1856.

18. 28 March 1856.

19. Each role, however similar in general to the others an actor might play, had some distinctive element—a bit of business or a line—which allowed the actor to display some new aspect of his art.

20. For a discussion of Mexican stage-literature in general and the work of Bretón de los Herreros, Pantaleón Tovar, and other playwrights (Spanish and Mexican) conspicuous at the Iturbide, see Antonio Magaña Esquivel and Ruth Lamb, *Breve historia del teatro mexicano* (México, 1958).

21. Nor should one overlook the possibility that although no director was mentioned, one may well have worked on the production.

22. The Theatre Regulation Act of 1846, (amended 1853), a national Act, established a

board of governors (junta inspectora del teatro) which was charged with, among other things, looking after scenery to insure its historical accuracy and to make certain decor was properly done. I infer from this that historical accuracy was the major criterion, if not the only one, for judging spectacle.

For more on the governmental regulation of theatre, see Christopher Stowell, pp. 513 ff.

23. Reyes de la Maza, p. 264.

24. The following list of opening dates for the beginning, middle, and end of the season gives an indication of the swiftness with which productions had to be made ready:

*Rehearsal Times*

- Beginning of the regime: 1. *La aventurera* (opened the fourth day of season) as did *Achaques de la vejez* (dance).  
 2. Four days after that *Dos validos y castillos en el aire* opened.  
 3. Repertory of pieces, none ran more than two days, for seven days. Then *Trampas inocentes* opened.  
 4. Three days later *El amante universal* opened.
- Middle of the regime: 29 Aug. *El marido calavera* opened.  
 2 Sept. *Un novio para la niña*  
 4 Sept. *Don César de Bazan*  
 11 Sept. *Don Juan de Austria*  
 14 Sept. *Vasco Nuñez de Balboa*  
 16 Sept. *La hija de las flores*  
 19 Sept. *Emma de Antiockia* and *El sitio de Sebastopol*
- End of the regime: 5 Dec. *El cuello de una camisa*  
 14 Dec. *El rábano por las hojas*  
 17 Dec. *El asombro de España*

25. "El Apuntador," *El Omnibus*, 7 April 1856.

26. 1 July 1956.

27. On 14 February 1856, an extraordinary performance was held under the auspices of señor Arbeu, not Oropesa, and consisted of a "Gran Concierto" at which the celebrated pianist Oscar Pfeiffer performed along with señor Manzini who sang operatic arias from the works of Bellini and Verdi. See Reyes de la Maza, pp. 230-32.

28. Compare these prices to those of the Nacional—for a sub-season ticket, 100 pesos for a first class box, 85 for second class box, 60 for a third class box, 16 for a seat in the pit, 18 for a seat in the balcony, and 6 for a seat in the gallery.

29. 27 March 1856.

30. José M. Pruneda, "Teatro de Iturbide," *El Omnibus*, 16 April 1856.

31. *Ibid.*

32. 18 April 1856.

33. *El Panorama*, 7 December 1856.

34. The press notes in May that both major houses were full and would probably remain so for some time. See *El Monitor*, 3 May 1856. Economic pressure, therefore, does not seem to be the motivation for adding matinees. It seems more likely that Oropesa sought increased attendance through increased performances.

35. We read in the reviews references to enthusiastic reception of the performances. The following are examples:

"The audience (at *Carlos II*) was immense . . . [and] applauded with wild enthusiasm ("*con frenesí*")." (Florencio del Castillo, "Teatro de Iturbide," *El Monitor*, 23 May 1856) "Multitudes of prolonged applause resounded through the theatre often, reaching a peak of enthusiasm when the entire company appeared [at the curtain call?] for their magnificent performance." ("El Apuntador," *El Omnibus*, 31 May 1856.)

"The public knew how to appreciate the talent, art, and inspiration of the actor [Mata] and applauded him with wild excitement ("*con frenesí*")." (Castillo, "Teatro de Iturbide," *El Monitor*, 10 June 1856.)

36. Manuela Francesconi, one of the leading actresses of the company, had had a brief, but acrimonious, disagreement with a part of the audience during a performance and was driven from the stage. A claque formed to keep her off until she apologized. The effects of this altercation upon attendance is not known, but Francesconi published an apology to her "friends" on 17 November and this satisfied the claque. See Olavarría y Ferrari, *op. cit.*, p. 649.

37. 7 April 1857.

48. Information about the scenery comes mainly from advertisements published by Oropesa in his bills. The following is a typical example:

New decorations produced by the talented painter Manuel Serrano in the second act (of *El duro y el millón*, 11 May 1856) when the plot requires artificial fire and in the third act a beautiful garden brilliantly illuminated in the palace of the king.

These scenes, not in the stock of scenery, had to be done especially, but could be used again when necessary. It is surprising and a trifle puzzling that the stock of scenery did not boast of a garden set, one of the most frequently used in melodrama and farce. Perhaps this was the first play produced which required a garden; after all, the Iturbide was still building its stock of scenery throughout the year. Oropesa, we have seen, promised to continue to build an "abundant" and "most complete and beautiful" stock of scenes. This would require time to complete.

39. Señora Francesconi, however, did not return in 1857.