

Mexico City Theatre: Spring 2002

Timothy G. Compton

In terms of dramatic art, 2002's spring theatre season in Mexico City was the strongest I have studied in Mexico. It featured an unusually large number of plays which were both aesthetically pleasing and thematically sound. Audiences could enjoy numerous selections by Mexican playwrights which both entertained and cajoled them to think. Unfortunately, the season lacked strength in its sheer number of performances. The May 30-June 5 edition of *Tiempo libre* advertised 122 plays for the week, 19 of which were for children. Of the 103 for adults, I calculated 60 were by Mexicans, compared to only 3 of the 19 for children. Although the raw number of plays was respectable, this season continued a trend I have seen develop over the last decade of having fewer and fewer weekly performances of plays. Ten years ago, the scheduling norm for plays on major stages was Wednesday through Sunday for adult plays and Saturday and Sunday matinees for children's theatre. Many other plays were available outside of this schedule in smaller venues as well, usually in multiple performances each week. By contrast, during this season I found only one play with the Wednesday through Sunday schedule. Select plays ran Thursday through Sunday, but most others played even fewer nights per week, a few plays for adults had the weekend matinee schedule, and many children's plays were performed only once a week. The debilitating financial crises the country has suffered makes Mexico City's ongoing or even increasingly excellent quality of theatre seem more and more miraculous.

Four plays stood out to me as masterpieces. The first, *La prisionera*, written by Emilio Carballido, directed by Mercedes de la Cruz, and performed in UNAM's Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, moved me as much as any play I have seen. Set in Venezuela early in the 20th century during the struggle to attain voting rights for women, the play hinged on the imprisonment of a

wealthy and well-known suffragette. Given her celebrity, Venezuela's military government decided to confine her not in a regular jail or prison, but in the home of a colonel, to be watched over by his wife. The wife was livid, but the special arrangement happened over her protests, and it soon became clear that although a literal "prisionera" resided in the house, the wife was even more of one to her husband and in society. After a very rocky start, eventually the two prisoners bonded, and the high society troublemaker helped the wife to see that she could free herself from ignorance, from fear, from resentments, from weakness, and from acting like a doormat in her home. Certainly the strength of women was one of the play's dominant themes, but so were "imprisonment," abuse of power, determination, the beauty of connecting in human relationships, and the power of learning and the value of literature for self liberation. Lumi Cavazos had top billing as the suffragette, but Juana María Garza's performance as the wife was equally powerful. Both showed wide ranges of emotions, moving convincingly from rage to tenderness to aloofness to vulnerability to pity to amusement to fear to joy. The set, designed along with the lighting and costumes by Arturo Nava, was a masterpiece in its own right, combining visual allure and functionality. Audience members observed the play from the three sides of the second-floor balcony, just a few feet from the prisoner's bedroom, which was on an enormous round wooden platform that connected to the fourth wall upstage and to a few descending steps downstage. It was supported from beneath by long, narrow lumbers. Since about 90% of the "room" lacked railings and the edges overlooked emptiness, the effect was that of a floating stage. The openness also facilitated the addition of numerous props during the play, including a huge trunk full of exquisite clothing and a full upright piano delivered from below by rope and pulley. Above the stage hung a massive dark metal "crown," the circumference of which matched that of the "room" and suggested a roof. The back wall separated the room from a small area representing a wash room, clearly visible. Also toward the back was a wrought-iron staircase leading upward to no place in particular, up which the prisoner would ascend to glimpse the ocean. The couple of stairs downstage led to a landing with a window, and then a long flight of stairs continued downward from there. Underneath the "bedroom" were the living quarters for the colonel and his wife. Living downstairs symbolized their place in society, and the arrangement also led to excellent theatre, since characters below could convincingly "spy" on second story conversations and actions while concealed from actors above, yet in view of spectators. Metal bars on the head and footboards of the bed, and the

“wall” separating the bedroom from the washroom deftly reminded spectators that this was an incarceration. Special effects related to lighting were particularly effective during a storm sequence and during a scene which beautifully mimicked the light of a rising moon. Costumes were highly significant to the play, and went beyond showcasing María’s gorgeous wardrobe. Her elegant clothing contrasted markedly with the frumpy attire of the housewife. The bond between the two was cemented when María presented Carolina with an elegant dress she had made for her, which both showed her care for her “jailer” and communicated the opinion that she deserved to pamper herself. Even sound effects deserve mention for their contributions to the play – sounds of the sea and of the storms from outside the house helped establish the setting, while music that María played at the piano was lovely inside it. This play combined memorable characters, compelling thematics, convincing and attractive dialogue, excellent acting, a genius set, and admirable theatrics.



La prisionera

Photo: José Jorge Carreón

The season’s second masterpiece, *1822: El año que fuimos imperio*, was written by Flavio González Mello, directed by Antonio Castro, and performed in UNAM’s Juan Ruiz de Alarcón theatre. True to its title, it featured

Iturbide's brief period of rule over Mexico in the early 1820s, highlighting his machinations to become Emperor, his abuses once in power, the difficulty of saving the country from its supposed "Savior," and how other demagogues were ready to step in once Iturbide was removed. Despite the disheartening self-serving politics of almost all of Mexico's early politicians and caciques portrayed in *1822*, it also showed the antidote in the person of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, who spoke bluntly of abuses, punctured balloons of self adulation, and put love of country and fellow men above love of self. Far from being a history lesson, although the basics of Mexican history were clearly accurate, *1822* had obvious repercussions for modern Mexico which were not lost on audience members sitting near me, as I heard them mutter "Salinas de Gortari" several times. The play unequivocally called for more Mexicans like Padre Mier to save the country from its leaders. The play's dialogue was especially delicious in its showcasing of hypocritical demagogical speeches by Iturbide, Santa Anna, Guadalupe Hidalgo, and other early Mexican congressmen, particularly in contrast with Padre Mier's disarming honesty. My favorite scenes were the hilarious portrayals of sessions of Congress. Actors took seats in the audience during these scenes so their flamboyant outbursts, their impassioned ironic speeches, their petty and self-serving proposals, and their off-the-record comments erupted like fireworks right next to spectators. Since the play required nine different settings, ranging from interiors of palaces, castles, theatres and houses, to city streets and the deep jungle of Veracruz, most of the set work designed by Mónica Raya consisted of exquisite two-dimensional backdrops which could be raised and lowered instantly. During the second act, politicians watched parts of the historical drama unfold from replicas of box seats from the Teatro Santa Anna from Mexico City's 19th century. All of the actors performed marvelously, but special commendations are in order for Mario Iván Martínez for his portrayal of the regally two-faced Iturbide, Hernán del Riego for an unforgettable version of Guadalupe Victoria completely demented after hiding in the jungle, Mario Zaragoza for his wicked embodiment of a contemptible early congressman and his inspired portrayal of a guide in the jungle, and Héctor Ortega for injecting grace and humor into the role of Padre Mier even as he showed his great dignity and integrity. As did *La prisionera, 1822* proved that intelligent, relevant theatre can be artistic, receive strong reviews, and attract strong audiences (without any nudity, foul language, or cheap humor).

The season's third masterpiece was *Tiernas puñaladas*, written and directed by Héctor Mendoza and performed in the beautifully remodeled Santa Catarina theatre, one of UNAM's off-campus theatre spaces. As the title suggests, this play focused on relationships. It was a profound and haunting study of human inconsistency, selfishness, betrayal and cruelty on the part of men, and an equally deep and nagging look at the way women accept such behavior from men. In the play, three brothers fawned over María Carmona, a bubbly, young, wacky, beautiful woman who came to visit the middle brother, a popular writer who was living with Silvia, a soap opera star. Although the youngest brother craved a relationship with María, the oldest brother abandoned his wife for her, and moved in with her almost against her will. A misogynist, he mistreated her and took away her youthful innocence until the middle brother abandoned Silvia to finish the job of reducing María to an emotional wreck. Bored with what they had made of María, both brothers ran back to their original partners. The older brother's wife readily accepted her monster back, while Silvia lost her mind for only one night before flying off to Argentina alone to start a new life. The youngest brother's love was never even remotely requited, except that before disappearing María left the message that she only ever really loved him. The play's set, designed by Alejandro Luna, was simple at first glance, but as the play progressed became more and more



Tiernas puñaladas

Photo: José Jorge Carreón

*Malas palabras*

Photo: Fernando Moguel

complex. The set's two walls were painted the same nondescript color as the curtain and door on one of the walls, but lighting turned them different colors. Only a pair of stackable chairs populated the play at its onset, but a previously undetected trapdoor on one wall yielded instantly a table with all the fixings of an elegant dinner. The door and curtain opened from time to time with different props or lighting combinations behind them. María Carmona's white dresses of the first act were particularly beautiful when bathed in different colored lights, and contrasted with her drab bathrobe wardrobe of the second act. The strength of this play lay in its exceptionally strong and well-delineated characters, who were played brilliantly and insightfully by young actors within just feet of spectators, in its complex yet cogent plot with its multiple interrelated love triangles, in its relevant, important, and yet accessible thematics, and in various sparkling aspects of the play's stagecraft.

The year's fourth masterpiece differed drastically from the first three, mostly because it belonged in the genre of children's theatre, so it was shorter and catered to a different audience. Also it was a monologue. Haydeé Boetto masterfully played the only part in Perla Szuchmacher's *Malas palabras*, the text of which won the award for the "Mejor Teatro para Niños 2001"

given by the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes. Szuchmacher also directed this version, staged in the Centro Helénico's experimental La Gruta theatre. Although Szuchmacher is from Argentina, she has been in Mexico since 1976 and has been an essential element of the "Grupo55" group, which works primarily in children's theatre but also gives workshops and has published books related to theatre production. The program included on its cover a subtitle which summarized perfectly the play's plot: *La historia de Flor, una niña adoptada, de cómo lo supo y todo lo que sucedió después*. Apparently a common taboo in Mexico has been the idea of telling adopted children that they were adopted, and this play tackled the subject through the eyes of an adopted child. She related the shock she felt at learning she was adopted, how she felt betrayed, and confused about who really were her parents. A friend helped her to understand that her adopted parents truly were her mother and father and that all was well, in an ending fitting for children's theatre. Two things made this play a masterpiece. First, the protagonist told her story a small percentage of the time, then acted out the majority of it, felicitously taking on numerous voices and personalities. Second, she used props in surprising and beautiful ways to tell her story. She turned the set's little desk with various routine items into a treasure trove of theatrical

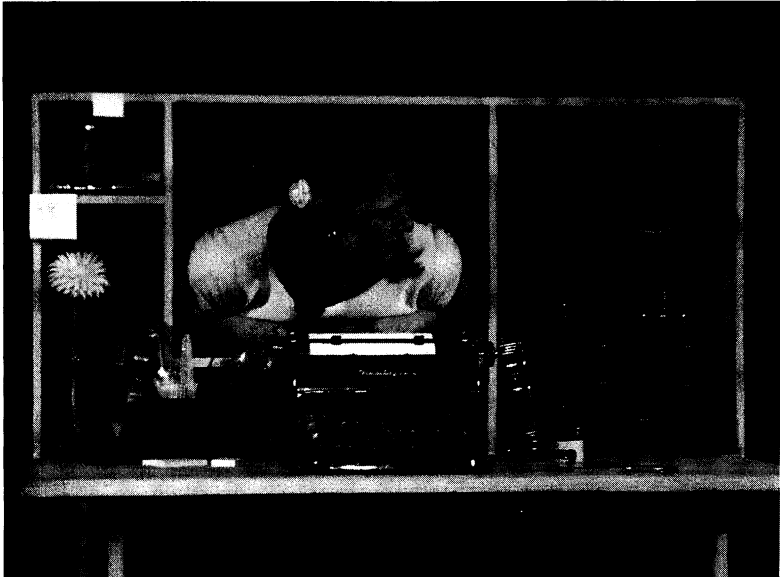
*Malas palabras*

Photo: Fernando Moguel

gems. In the dramatized flashbacks, a napkin, a set of glasses, a fan, and a perfume bottle became puppets representing, respectively, her mother, her father, her aunt, and herself. A stapler became a horse, the keyboard on the typewriter became stairs, a garbage can became her house, an umbrella became a merry-go-round, and post-it notes represented photos. This masterful use of props and the representation of scenes from the girl's past transformed a sweet play into a little masterpiece of dramatic art.

On the subject of masterful performances, I hasten to mention three other plays of the highest merit from the season. I dwell on them less only because of their indiscretion of not having been written by a Mexican or in Mexico. The first, *¿Quién ha visto a mi pequeño niño?*, was a children's piece by Dutch playwright Suzanne van Lohuizen, directed by Luis Martín Solís and performed by two of Mexico's finest comic actors, Carlos Cobos and Arturo Reyes. The pair of young characters they represented dedicated themselves to games and roleplaying, including the game of being parents, hence the play's title. Cobos and Reyes were brilliant bundles of nonstop energy for a full hour, doing things so nimble and surprising that at times I almost felt I was watching a cartoon or a show with visual and audio special effects. Their myriad instantaneous changes from one attitude or character to another was like a Robin Williams routine, but with two Robin Williams who played off each other in their facial expressions, body actions, and dialogue, with impeccable timing and delightful results. *Arlequin: Servidor de dos patronas* hailed from Italy's Commedia dell'arte, so it was full of stock characters, masks, lovely costumes, an Italian setting, an agile plot, and demanding roles. Written by Carlo Goldini and directed by José Solé in the Claustro of the Centro Cultural Helénico, its actors delivered fabulous performances, marked by exact comic timing, hilarious improvised interaction with the audience, and tremendous acrobatics. Jorge Robles deserves special mention for his work in the title role, as does Arturo Nava for designing a minimal set which delightfully represented three different settings by changing three larger paintings on a sort of cart, in concert with alternating the painted sides of four three-sided columns. *Trattaria D'Improvizzo: Comida dell'Arte* was not a play per se, but an improvised performance very much in the style of the television show *Whose Line Is It, Anyway?* Although the media listed Alberto Lomnitz as the director, and the program cited him as "Gerente de la Trattaría," he considers himself an "entrenador." Structured as a meal, spectators were seated and given "menus" by waiters who turned into performers. Actors performed an improvisation from each section of the menu—

a drink, an appetizer, an hors d'oeuvre, a soup, a main course, and a dessert. Spectators would choose which type of improvisation from each section, then give situations or characters, then the actors would create on the fly! For the main course, for example, the foursome created a small play set at the North Pole where a couple had its first baby, which looked like Santa Claus. At the audience's request, they then performed the same play in three different styles, a la Shakespeare ("¡Cuán grande enigma es el hielo, señor mío!"), then as a modern dance, and finally as a musical comedy. Although the Trattaría played every Tuesday night (and was nearing a year's worth of performances the night I attended), the cast changed weekly. Haydeé Boetto, Ricardo Esquerri, Carmen Mastache and Juan Carlos Vives played brilliantly the performance I attended, as did Julieta Ortiz as the maitre d'. They performed hilariously for more than two hours to a nearly full house, many of whom had attended before since no two performances ever have been or ever will be even remotely similar.



La moneda de oro: Freud o Jung?

Photo: José Jorge Carreón

My next group of plays consists of near-masterpieces – plays with indisputable strengths and overwhelmingly positive traits, but which seemed at the next level. The first, Ignacio Solares' *La moneda de oro: ¿Freud o*

Jung?, was directed by Antonio Crestani and performed in the Wilberto Cantón theatre owned by SOGEM (SOCiedad General de Escritores Mexicanos, which has recently been fighting tax legislation detrimental to professional writers). Solares considers this an experimental piece because it merges an extended monologue into a traditional play. Indeed, for the first 21 minutes the character Clara, since she was the only patient to have been treated by both Freud and Jung, spoke about them as if to an audience at a conference on Parapsychology. As she spoke about Jung's final years, during which he lived in a tower without electricity or telephones and dedicated himself to making contact with spirits of the dead, he came to life and interacted with her. Jung, in turn, summoned Freud from the dead, and they had an intense conversation about the relative merits of their work, punctuated by accusations about the shortcomings each was well aware the other had, and nearly ended up in fisticuffs. The play's high point came when they took turns psychoanalyzing each other, of course occupying the famous couch, and learning what it was like to have someone else interpret and misinterpret their thoughts and words. Ultimately, this play was a clever psychological look at the phenomenon of rivalries, with Freud smugly proud to lord over his disciple that he was the more famous of the two, while Jung pretentiously laid claim to being more correct. Although a gold coin from Clara's past entered into her psychoanalysis, in the play's final moment Freud and Jung decided to settle their dispute over greatness with a flip of that coin (alas, the play ended before seeing the outcome). Aisles illuminated by candles on tall candlesticks, and the ringing of bells instead of the traditional three "llamadas" to announce the start of the play immersed spectators into a unique ambiance even before the play. Arturo Nava designed the beautiful and alluring three-part set, which started with a microphone in front of an enormous abstract painting by "Chon," then opened to feature the famous couch and analyst's chair (resting on a round platform reminiscent of the golden coin), behind which was a replica on an exquisite oriental wall hanging Freud owned, and finally revealed a stunning elevated space upstage representing Jung's tower, with beautiful furnishings, curved stairways and shelves, and an enormous bank of bookshelves which split open and shook violently to allow Freud to enter. Despite several lulls in the monologue and at several other points, this play featured compelling characters, universal themes, strong acting, a beautiful set, excellent use of dramatic space, and rich dialogue.

Felipe Galván's *Cóndor a la luz de la luna* is the first play of which I am aware which has tackled the subject of Mexico's little known "Dirty

War,” during which the Mexican military killed, tortured, and “disappeared” civilians during the 1970’s. Based on the case of a general currently in jail for trafficking drugs, the play started with him in his cell, delirious. Flashbacks returned him to the years of the Dirty War and revealed atrocities he had committed as a colonel. He also was contacted by some of the souls he had dispatched to purgatory who were still wandering aimlessly, fruitlessly trying to make sense of their fate in the same mode as the characters of *Pedro Páramo*. *Cóndor* boldly highlighted the issues of fanatical “patriotism,” the excessive power exercised by the PRI, the blind autonomy given to military leaders, the abuse of power of those in control, corruption, violence, drug trafficking, and the failings of the Mexican justice system. Mario Alcántara directed a very intense cast composed of one professional actor, Juan Carlos Remolina as the General, and a group of relative unknowns, all of whom performed remarkably. I attended a run-through of the play before its premiere, so I did not experience the massive multimedia efforts which audiences saw during later performances – an enormous screen behind the actors, in addition to multiple smaller screens with closed circuit projections of aspects of the on-stage action. Perhaps if I had seen a performance with all the trimmings I would have added it to my list of masterpieces. In the version I saw, characters changed costumes in the shadows at the back of the stage, all the while watching the play, suggesting that there are witnesses to crimes which perpetrators think they commit in solitude. This was a powerful play, extremely well acted, and with pioneering subject matter. Its performance may well only have become possible because of the election of a non-PRI president in 2000.

The “Ensamble Mexicano de Espectáculos” performed a solid version of Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda’s *Contrabando* at the Casa del Lago. Juan Ibáñez Ruiz directed and shortened slightly the original text, an intense look at how drug trafficking and corruption have transformed a town in Chihuahua. Beatriz Monroy and Paulina De Labra were particularly effective in their roles as Damiana and Jacinta, telling and reliving the tragic stories of their suffering and losses due to drug traffic. The theatre’s space was problematic, with spectators close to the stage and inadequate risers for rows behind the first, so the majority of the audience could not see portions of the play. All could see images and video projected on the high wall above the actors. These projections added color to the stories the characters told, and helped round out an image of the town. Ibáñez Ruiz told me that the group has been performing the play in public schools as a springboard to discussions with

young people about the effects of drug use, and that they were taking advantage of the summer to stage a short commercial run.

My final near masterpiece of the season was *El Galán Fantasma, o la versión híper super y recontraliberrísima de un Calderón con frijoles* by Gerardo Mancebo del Castillo Trejo and directed by Claudia Ríos. *El Galán* followed in the spirit of Mancebo's prior projects, combining Spain's Golden Age with current-day Mexico by maintaining the basic plot, setting and characters of one of Calderón's plays, but allowing some of the characters to be very modern and Mexican. The Duque remained in Spain's Golden Age, fretting over his honor and nobility and looking to marry for status, while his servant Porcia and her partner in crime, Candil, were Mexican *pícaras*, spinning fanciful lies and even impersonating a ghost to try to get to the Duque's riches. This play featured a funny, convoluted plot, outstanding performances from Carmen Ramos as Porcia and Susana Garfel as the Duque, strong performances from the rest of the cast, witty lyrics coupled with original music, and an intriguing ambiance straddling two worlds. The sense of playfulness in the play was heightened because actresses played even the roles of the male characters. Given *El Galán's* considerable artistic merits, I felt particularly disappointed by crude sound effects and language and overemphasis on sex.

Finally, I mention in passing a number of plays with noteworthy characteristics, but which I felt had serious flaws and did not pan out to me as works of art. *Conato de amor o El porqué de romperles el hocico a los caballos* was another Gerardo Mancebo del Castillo Trejo piece, this one directed by Rubén Ortiz. Upon entering the cavernous Julio Castillo theatre, spectators were given a tie or jewelry to wear as if guests at an sumptuous meal, and then were seated to a small beverage and bite to eat at an enormous U-shaped table, joining a pair of elegantly dressed actors frozen at the ends of the U. The table was the stage, lit from beneath, and spectators found themselves immersed into a wonderfully evocative world. Unfortunately, the dialogue and plot did not match the inspiration of the setting, and intense acting did not save the play. *La suerte de la consorte* was a "play" based on Sara Sefchovich's highly renowned book on Mexico's first ladies covering nearly 500 years. Roberto D'Amico adapted and directed the play, but the result seemed more a history lesson than theatre. Five famous actresses from television wore the most elegant of dresses, strutted aristocratically, sang beautifully, and told the stories of various first ladies in a series of monologues, but acted out very little of their lives. *Fedra y otras griegas*,

written by Ximena Escalante and directed by José Caballero, featured an amazing set (first circus grounds, then a ship deck, then a street scene) on an inclined stage, but at the expense of over half the seats in the Granero theatre, leaving some of the remaining seats with extremely limited visibility. The play showed how Mexican lives mirror Greek mythology, but the premise was hard to appreciate because of at least three things. First, the number of characters was excessive, with actors confusingly playing multiple roles. Second, the play jumped mercilessly from one myth and situation to others. Third, spectators not extensively versed in Greek mythology could not fill in the details. The costumes were often brilliant, with special commendation due the Medusa and Minotaur costumes, and the acting intense, but the play as a whole did not speak to me. Similarly, *Callejón no me olvidas*, a play based loosely on *Edificio Esperanza* by Jaime Chabaud and directed by Juliana Faesler, featured a very interesting set of characters, excellent acting, and some impressive vocal performances, but the plot itself jumped around so much that it was hard to connect the dots or to feel much for the characters as human beings. This was an exam for students of UNAM's Centro Universitario de Teatro, so the wildly eccentric set of characters lent themselves to the task, and the actor students did solid work at portraying a bullfighter, Siamese twins, a religious fanatic, a pair of lesbian lovers, a boy scout, a woman unable to talk, and her desperate husband. All lived in the same building which blew up due to a gas leak by play's end, an event reminiscent of the gas explosion which took so many lives in Guadalajara in the early 1990's. *Cuando quiero llorar, no lloro* was written by Edgar Chías and directed by Rodrigo Mendoza. Like *Callejón*, it studied the inhabitants of single apartment building, but suffered from having too many characters too poorly defined to identify with (sometimes even to identify), especially because the same door represented the entrance to the apartments of several different people, and the same person would enter one door one time and another the next. The first act seemed to be headed toward a clever plot stemming from misidentifications and misunderstandings, but the second act ended up showing men as macho pigs and women as foolish willing victims. Similarly, *Elixir de Emir* suffered from showing only the weakness of its characters. In it, two middle-aged single women were so desperate to find a man that they responded to an advertisement to place themselves in the running to become an Emir's wife. Of course it was a scam, they lost their money and their dignity and swore to be more careful. Written by José J. Vázquez and directed by Ramón Gutiérrez Chapa, it featured some light moments

when the scam artists worked on their naive victims and taught its youthful audience to avoid to similar trouble.

Finally, I would note that a larger number of plays than usual were playing during this season with new casts or partially new casts which premiered considerably earlier (and on which I have reported in prior reports), among them Sabina Berman's *Feliz nuevo siglo Doktor Freud* and *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda*, *Cosas de muchachos* by Willebaldo López, *Salón de belleza* by Mario Bellatin, and Vicente Leñero's *Que pronto se hace tarde*. Leñero's play was billed this year as "Teatro en tu casa," which symbolizes to me how Mexico's theatre world continues to generate innovative ways of creating theatre, and the theatre itself continues as artistically vibrant and attractive as ever.

Northern Michigan University



La prisionera

Photo: José Jorge Carreón