

Mexico City's Spring 2004 Theatre Season

Timothy G. Compton

Although this season did not have the amazing vitality of the Spring 2003 season (see my report from a year ago in *LATR*), it still had many excellent offerings. As always, it had numerous offerings, period, although fewer than in prior seasons. The May 6-12 edition of *Tiempo Libre* advertised 82 plays for adults, and 30 for children. A number of people in theatre circles reported to me that government support for culture in general and theatre in particular was down this season. Some of the outstanding plays of prior seasons on which I have reported continued successful runs (including *Extras*, *La Marta del Zorro*, *Químicos para el amor*,¹ *Las obras completas de William Shakespeare* and *1822*), and a number of successful plays from recent years made their way to the stage with entirely new casts and looks (among them *Opción múltiple* and *Camino rojo a Sabaiba*). The best plays of the season were excellent, but the quality of the rest seemed to drop more precipitously than in past years. The number of top-notch plays written by Mexican playwrights was unfortunately thin, while there was no shortage of plays by foreigners, including some by classic playwrights such as Sophocles, Molière, Shakespeare, Kafka, and Lope de Rueda, and others more contemporary such as Neil Simon, George Kaiser, Bernard-Marie Koltés, Mark Ravenhill, Eve Ensler, and Monzaemón Chikamatsu, to name a few from various parts of the globe.

Almost all of the new offerings which I considered the season's best were staged in smallish venues, and one of the very best was really off the beaten theatre path in the Foro Tadeo Antonio González Caballero, home of the Tadeo group, a group which has been in existence for 22 years. *La insoportable brevedad de ser*, directed by Miguel Angel Flores, was made up of five short plays from playwrights of four nationalities. The sets for all



La insoportable brevedad de ser
By Miguel Angel Flores

five plays were minimal, consisting of up to five cubes configured differently for each play and which served primarily as tables, desks or chairs. Four actors played a total of seventeen roles. Special kudos are in order for Rocío Couoh, who acted in all five plays, had major roles in four of them, and showed remarkable versatility in those four, ranging from a sweet, introspective expectant mother to a hysterical manipulative middle class wife to an obsessive tobacco advocate in a treatment center to a disfigured, hunchbacked, “disposable” girlfriend. Marta Betoldi of Argentina wrote the first play, *Contracciones*, which consisted of alternating monologues two pregnant women directed to their unborn children. As they delivered their monologues in their pajamas, they wrote in their diaries. It gradually came to light that one was living during Argentina’s “Dirty War” in 1976 and ended up giving birth in a detention center. In the play’s beautiful final image, the diary of the first woman reached the hands of the second – she was the baby born in the center. Luisa Josefina Hernández translated the second play, *La paz en casa*, written by Georges Courteline at the beginning of the 20th century. Couoh and Gustavo Avila portrayed a couple in a histrionic marital



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spat in which the husband kept a log of his wife's shortcomings and then "fined" her for them by withholding part of her monthly allowance. The wife fought back with threats of separation and even suicide, which prompted him to calmly take out his notebook and "fine" her a small amount for making the threat and a larger one for not carrying it out. She eventually received her money in full, but the two obviously enjoyed the drama of their relationship. Spain's José Sanchis Sinisterra wrote the third play, *Lo bueno de las flores es que se marchitan pronto*, the shortest play of the night (15 minutes). From the mode of theatre of the absurd, this play offered a central image of four down and out characters in line to pick up face cards, participating in

odd, disjointed dialogue, which included the odd assertion which makes up the play's title. This play seemed out of place in this set of plays. Santos Gabriel Piste, from the state of Yucatán, wrote the fourth play, a very funny gem called *¿Alguien tiene un cigarro?*, which was set in a substance treatment center and whose main character was definitely not doing well in her treatment. She offered many words of "wisdom" as she interacted with her counselor, such as: "en la vida hay buenos y malos: los que fuman y los que no," "el cigarro es vital para la existencia," and "nací para fumar." Mexican Alejandro Licona wrote the brilliant final play, *La que hubiera amado tanto*, the longest play of the set (38 minutes). The play's protagonist, a confirmed bachelor, learned from a friend about the existence of "disposable" women. One could buy them in a can, "activate" them, and then "deactivate" them at will. He gave the idea a whirl, but his dented can yielded a disfigured woman instead of a beauty. Yet he fell in love with her, and when his friend "deactivated" her, he obtained another can and dented it up before activating it. Flores told me that when *La insoportable* . . . premiered in February, they placed *Contracciones* at the end, but performing it first has brought much more positive feedback from audiences. These five plays were beautifully performed, albeit to a very small audience in the performance I saw, in an industrial "Colonia" (Granjas), and attest to the fact that excellent theatre exists in Mexico City even far from its theatre hotbeds.

Luis Mario Moncada's *El diccionario sentimental* was staged in one of the City's most reliable locales for excellent theatre, UNAM's Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Mario Espinosa directed this play, which took advantage of the rising and lowering stage described in my report a year ago on *Ahora y en la hora*. In a sense, the storyline of this play was somewhat pedestrian in portraying human relations in a marriage gone bad, spiced with infidelity, pettiness, and venom. Four factors elevated it to a much higher level. First, the wife's professional career involved producing a dictionary related to love and emotions, which brought into excruciating focus the roller coaster ride of her marital relations. Second, Philippe Amand's set and lighting designs were brilliant as usual, particularly with regard to the richness and variety of colors he used in the lighting. Third, the play included eye-popping computer-generated video segments in which several internal organs of the human anatomy interacted, representing playfully the husband's emotional turmoils during a drug overdose. Fourth, and most importantly, a funny little character called Usbek slinked around the stage during the entire play, emotionless and soundless, observing the characters without them seeing

him, or her, or it. Usbek turned out to be an extraterrestrial being who had come to earth to learn about humans. Only at the end of the play did Usbek speak, in a virtuoso monologue performance running the gamut of emotions observed in the play, and showing how manipulative and inane many of them were. All performances in this play were of the highest quality, with special commendation to Lorena Glinz as Usbek and Hernán Mendoza as the husband.

In the nearby Foro del CUT, the graduating class of the school staged a masterful performance of Oscar Liera's *El camino rojo a Sabaiba*, directed by Sergio Galindo. In contrast with a performance of this play which I saw several years earlier, this one had a lighter tone which allowed the text's humor to shine even as the play's rich, serious themes of abuse of power, cruelty, fear, and revenge continued to make their presence known. The set designed by Francisco Alvarez worked perfectly. It consisted primarily of four large "boulders" on wheels which took on many configurations during the play and had multiple uses ranging from tombs, a bar, a ship, a stage, or the title's path. The "boulders" were hollow and had trap doors, so actors emerged from them, walked on them, or murmured from beneath or behind



Camino Rojo a Sabaiba
Photo by: José Jorge Carreón



Camino Rojo a Sabaiba
Photo by: José Jorge Carreón

them. This set contributed very effectively to the world of the dead portrayed in this play. Several other elements in the staging of the play were masterful, including sound effects made almost entirely on stage by the cast (rain, goats, murmurs, footsteps), simple but effective costumes designed by Alicia Lara (which included delightful goat and tarantula outfits), and powerful use of lights and shadows, including the play's final image of a shadow of the main character hanging lifeless from a tree. One of the play's finest effects was of the sea, which consisted of undulating fabric bathed in light and emitting the sounds of the ocean. This effect established very effectively the setting of coastal Sinaloa. The actors were highly accomplished in their multiple, difficult roles. This play allowed a generation of actor graduates to show

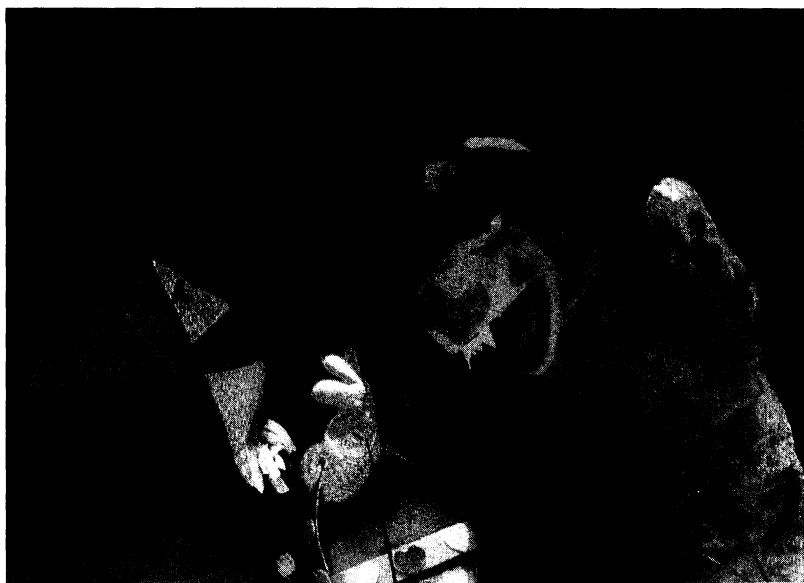
their acting merits, but unlike what often happens in such circumstances, when actors strut their stuff but the play comes across as incoherent, this play turned out to be among the finest works of dramatic art I have seen.

Nuestra Señora de las Nubes was billed as an “Adaptación libre del texto de Aristides Vargas,” an Argentine playwright and actor who has lived in Ecuador since 1977. Directed by Néstor Galván, this play was a poignant look at the issue of exile. Rodolfo Arias and Emma Dib exquisitely played the main characters, both exiled from the country “Nuestra Señora de las Nubes.” They spent time reflecting on their home country and on the difficult experience of living in exile, and from time to time flashes from their pasts leapt to life. The play’s dialogue was outstanding, effectively reflecting the nostalgia and confusion and absurdities of exile. Some of the richest exchanges incorporated repetition with slight variations. “Me parece haber visto su cara,” “No tiene acento,” “No voy a mantener silencio,” and “El exilio empieza cuando matamos las cosas queridas” were among the favorite starting points for repetitions. The characters often spiraled into absurdities which showed their confusion at being exiles, giving absurd reasons for their exile, theorizing on myriad possibilities for the future, and getting into “piropo” contests. Arias showed comic genius in his portrayal of the ruler of the old country during a state ball and also in portraying the conductor of an orchestra which fell apart under his baton. Dib’s range of powerful emotions made spectators consider in earnest the plight of exiles, of which Mexico has many. This play was sometimes zany, but ultimately proved profoundly moving.

Gerardo Trejoluna performed Austrian Peter Handke’s play *Autoconfesión* in the most remarkable monologue performance I have ever seen. Directed by Rubén Ortiz, Trejoluna has been performing this play, which has an excellent website (www.autoconfesion.com), for several years in a variety of places, including New York, Madrid, and numerous cities in Mexico. After just 15 minutes of the performance, the actor was drenched in sweat from the physical exertion of the role. And he continued with amazing intensity for over another hour. This play gets at the essence of the basic elements of what it means to live. Some of the major themes, developed in massive concatenations of assertions, were: “adquirí vocabulario. . . aprendí las reglas. . . yo me expresé. . . yo caminé. . . usé objetos. . . amé. . . desobedecí. . .” He incorporated fire, water, earth and air, representing basic elements of human existence. His vocal range and ability to use his own body as an instrument were astounding. His corporeal control and creation of sometimes beautiful, sometimes unusual images was breathtaking. His use of a few props to create

compelling sounds and images (drops of water, a net to create clothing or a womb, feathers, drums, a berimbau) was masterful. Performed in the round, spectators on all sides witnessed a unique tour de force in dramatic art.

Three plays of vastly different genres were absolute comic delights, although lacking in substance. The first was an openly commercial venture, *10 El Marido Perfecto*, by Adrián Ortega and directed by Mauricio Herrera, who also played the leading role. As with other commercial plays I have seen, spectators applauded when television star members of the cast would first appear on the stage, the set was elegant, the costumes lovely, the venue large, and ticket prices high. The plot was serviceable, with a wife anxious for controversy in her marriage, so her husband invented an affair of many years prior, which led to conflict but was eventually resolved. However, this was by far the funniest commercial play I have seen, thanks primarily to the genius comic acting of Herrera. Numerous times during the play other actors struggled to keep their composure in response to his verbal, corporal and facial improvisations. Scenes in which Herrera interacted with actor Eduardo Meza Peña (Lalo “El Mimo”) were particularly brilliant, as they played off each other with amazing timing and quickness. Ramón López Valdepeña wrote, directed, and “acted” in the title role of *Chilcatoyo: El lobo*



Chilcatoyo: El Lobo vegetariano

vegetariano, a lovely children's play primarily performed by puppets. This was a deliciously madcap Mexicanized adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood, in which the wolf proved his goodness, Little Red was in the mode of an all-star wrestler, the hunter was a coward who wanted to pursue a career in fashion design, and the grandmother and wolf shared a love for chilacoyote sandwiches. Each character had two puppet types – a muppet-style puppet which performed in a traditional boxed stage, and a nearly life-sized version which performed in the open, operated from behind by puppeteers shrouded in black. The puppets and plot were delightful children's theatre which was highly entertaining to adults as well. The third "play," *Va de reto*, was staged by the Liga Mexicana de Improvisación, directed by Ricardo Esquerra and Juan Carlos Vives. The actors chose teams, then challenged each other in improvised skits. They played ten games, about half of which were hilarious. My favorite was an improvised Spaghetti Western, which included human tumbleweeds, horses, clocks, gun fights, and swinging doors. It included flashbacks, scenes in slow motion, close-ups, recurring jokes, some of which echoed prior games, wacky characters, and a semi-coherent storyline ending with "Y así fue como se cambió el nombre del pueblo de Pata de Mula a Buffalo Hill." Taniel Morales provided ongoing sound effects throughout the event, using an amazing array of sound-making gizmos. This "play" was both highly entertaining and showed remarkable talent on the part of the very young cast.

The final play from the top tier of plays I saw this season was a unique staging of Calderón's *El príncipe constante*, directed by Miguel Flores. This piece from Spain's Golden Age featured a plot which seemed to be a commentary on the ongoing war in Iraq, a topic very much on the mind of Mexicans. The title character personified friendship, loyalty, mercy and honor, even during war against the moors. Ironically, I saw the play the same week the world was seeing the horrible images from the prison in Abu Ghraib and the beheading of Nicholas Berg in Iraq. By contrast, this play showed the protagonist treating his "enemy" as a human being with dignity and respect. The other noteworthy aspect of this performance was that actors performed it on the stairway of the colonial Museo del Carmen, which provided a unique, rich environment, but added a degree of difficulty for the actors, who performed very well.

The next tier of plays from the season included a number with noteworthy characteristics, but did not seem to come together fully. *Esta es la historia de un niño que creció y todavía se acuerda de algunas cosas*

was written, directed, and performed by Luisa Pardo Urías and Gabino Rodríguez Lines. This was a very sweet, nostalgic play in which the main character told about his age of innocence, leading up to his first kiss. As he told the story, through flashbacks he would return to the time of the events narrated to show them. This little piece had great merit, but needed to be lengthened and have further substance. *Vicente y Ramona*, with text by Emilio Carballido and directed by Víctor Carpinteiro, was staged at the Círculo Teatral school. Set during the Mexican Revolution, this was a classic story of machismo, love, power, and revenge. Vicente stole Ramona and tried to woo her, but she killed him. This play's strong suits included excellent choreography, strong live musical pieces, and flashes of strong acting. Unfortunately, the plot was chaotic, and often the actors yelled to portray emotion instead of actually portraying emotion. *Las gelatinas*, written and directed by Claudia Ríos, featured a fascinating subject – mental retardation in adults and how it affects family life. Sergio Cataño did a splendid job of playing Roberto, the mentally retarded man, but the play left many loose ends, including a bizarre, shadowy presence of a silent double Roberto. *El fantasma del Hotel Alsace*, written by Vicente Quirarte and directed by Eduardo Ruiz Saviñón, explored the final days of Oscar Wilde, holed up in a hotel in Paris. The best moments of the play came when Bram Stoker visited him dressed as Dracula, and the two sparred over the relative merits of Dracula and Dorian Grey. Another memorable scene personified a drug overdose through the visit of a green fairy. I am sure Wilde fans loved every minute of this play, but others less involved with him did not. Another play highlighting the fallout from war, *El Monte Calvo*, was written by Colombian Jairo Aníbal Niño and directed by Silvia Rizzo. The first half of the play moved very slowly, when an injured veteran and his down-and-out buddy commiserated and tried to keep warm. The second half acquired life when a character arrived who thought he was a colonel in the war. The other two played along, and it turned into an effective critique of the military attitude, especially in light of the poverty it brought to the veteran. Nevertheless, the set was very poor, the acting uneven, and efforts to tie the play to Iraq were just silly.

Finally, I regret that I must report that some plays of this season in Mexico City had very little going for them. They included a monologue about a drunkard of a teacher who cared little for her students, but was about to receive the honor as teacher of the year, a play for children which featured children committing all sorts of crimes and using horrible language, a conference by Neruda in which he looked back on his life but which had

very little charm, puppet theatre in which Pinocchio battled a wicked witch who stole vowels, and another monologue in which a woman told about her strange relatives and how they died. The foregoing plays were far from great theatre, but *No ser. Hamlet. Los enterradores* was the worst play of the year. The tiny program declared that the show could last between 1 and 120 minutes. Before going into the *theatre*, all spectators had to sign a sheet affirming that they knew the play could last between 1 and 120 minutes. Inside, there were no chairs for spectators and no indication of where spectators should be. The room looked more like an abandoned warehouse than a *theatre*, with mostly vacant floors, a table here, a couple of risers apparently randomly placed on the floor, a microphone, and several sets of unused risers stacked along several walls. Nine “performers” were in the room, most of them sitting, but others were lying motionless in the dark. After a time a small light was turned on, and a child started to read, stumbling over words and with no emotion, and apparently at random, passages from *Hamlet*. A man on occasion would play his trumpet. A woman videotaped things in the room at random. A pair of men opened a jar of cockroaches and let them loose, at first keeping them on the table on which the boy read, but later letting them roam the entire room. Later on, a man drew circles around cockroaches and labeled them with items from *Hamlet*, such as “Gertrudis” and “Dinamarca.” After about an hour of this chaos, several “performers” sauntered out of the room. Some spectators clapped, others looked at each other in disbelief. Was it over? Had it started? What was the point? How could this “play” run four times a week? Did we really pay to see this? How did it receive Conaculta funding? Was that theatre? Fortunately, the Spring 2004 season in Mexico City featured plenty to applaud. Its strong plays far outweighed those lacking in excellence. Once again Mexican theatre proved its resilience and relevance, despite lack of sufficient funding, government corruption scandals, and ongoing economic difficulties for the masses.

Northern Michigan University

Notes

¹ *Químicos para el amor* deserves a correction from my Spring 2003 report: Carmina Narro wrote all three texts of this excellent triptych, and each was directed by a different director, which makes it an even more noteworthy project.