

Latin American Theatre Today 2005 in Connecticut

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The sixth edition of Latin American Theatre Today was the first held away from the University of Kansas. The University of Connecticut hosted the event and provided its setting, Laurietz Seda organized it, gathered the resources and staff, and made sure that things ran smoothly. George Woodyard, who obviously relished his role as non-organizer, gave the Festival's only keynote address the first evening, delivering the University of Connecticut "Luis Eyzaguirre Lecture" which he entitled "One Hundred Years of Plenitude: Key Moments in 20th Century Latin American theatre." He identified and commented on what he considers to be ten key moments or forces in twentieth-century Latin American theatre, some of which were events (such as the 1968 Festival de Manizales), some were movements (such as the Teatro del Pueblo phenomenon in Buenos Aires) and others were people with huge impacts on theatre (such as Florencio Sánchez, Rodolfo Usigli, Seki Sano and Eugenio Barba).

Mornings featured presentations of *ponencias* in concurrent sessions running five-deep, so some 100 scholars presented with representation from numerous countries. Many presentations dealt with the major theme of the conference, "Traducción, transgénero y transnacionalismo." Early afternoons featured playwright roundtables with multiple playwrights each afternoon. These included Eduardo Rovner, Cristina Escofet, Nora Glickman, Héctor Levy-Daniel from Argentina; Frank and Reynaldo Disla from the Dominican Republic; Roberto Ramos-Perea, Aravind Adyanthaya and Carlos Canales from Puerto Rico; Guillermo Schmidhuber, Antonio Zúñiga and Estela Leñero from Mexico; Migdalia Cruz, a Puerto Rican from New York; and Guillermo Gómez Peña, a Mexican now based in San Francisco. They spoke about their relationship with theatre and society, their work and fielded questions. Many of them personified the conference theme of transnationalism.

Late afternoons featured workshops on translation or performance, “lecturas dramatizadas” of plays recently written by Estela Leñero, Carlos Canales and Nora Glickman, a live interview with Roberto Ramos-Perea, and screening of a film documentary. Two performances occurred nightly, with a bonus afternoon puppet show on April 6. The schedule of organized events ran from 8 AM to 10 PM, entirely on the University of Connecticut campus, which had beautiful facilities for all events.

Plays at theatre festivals tend to be performed by small casts with minimal sets and technical requirements, and seek to break new ground in their content or technique. These traits largely describe the whole of the nine performances of this festival. Four of the plays were monologues. Four others had casts of two. The play with the largest cast had four actors. About half of the performances did not have a traditional story line and about the same number featured non-traditional visual imagery. Almost all lasted about an hour, with the longest lasting about 80 minutes. Four performances took place entirely in Spanish, one entirely in Portuguese, three almost entirely in English, and one had portions in English and others in Spanish.

The highlight of the performances for me was Aravind Adyanthaya’s *Prometeo encadenado*, which he wrote, directed and performed himself. This was an “escritura dramatizada,” in which the set consisted almost entirely of a laptop computer on a desk with a chair and a large screen onto which was projected what Adyanthaya input to the computer. The major action of the play was just that, the inputting of data into a computer, which sounds rather dull, but in fact the audience seemed entertained and riveted to the monologue throughout. At first, when the only action was watching the performer type, the audience seemed to chuckle at even simple typographical errors. Perhaps the amusement stemmed from our surprise at seeing something so mundane as processing words transformed into theatre. Later the play become interactive with the audience, as Adyanthaya told the story of Prometheus, then interacted brilliantly with an audience volunteer, then went into the audience himself and finally led the audience in chants and word plays. Although some of this sounds silly, in fact this play examined several subjects in rather profound ways. One of the most striking was a profound look into the nature of symbols, and particularly letters and words. He played with the word “Translation,” examining its multiple meanings from the dictionary and how it could be applied to Prometheus. He input into his computer what looked like gibberish, but changed the font of the inputted characters and it turned into a meaningful message. He input a series of

acronyms and symbols such as OJ and RSVP, which at first looked like chaos, but interpreted one by one turned into an intelligible message (“oye” for OJ, and “favor de contestar” for RSVP, etc.). As the play neared its end, Adyanthaya highlighted the more than 30 pages of text he had input. And then he hit the delete button and closed the computer. I gasped and noticed my neighbor did also. The record of the brilliant, unique performance we had just witnessed had been destroyed, and all that remained was our memory of it.

Mondongo Scam was another of the finest plays of LATT '05. Written and performed by Claudio Mir, transplanted from the Dominican Republic to the US, *Mondongo Scam* represented the extraordinary picaresque efforts of a Dominican immigrant to the United States not to be deported and prosecuted for using illegal documents. It was partly a raucous statement of defense delivered by a young man before an immigration judge in a deportment hearing, but it also featured abundant flashback representations of key moments in this immigrant's bid to stay in the US, some of them hilarious. The characters within the character which Mir created were delightful and unique, and Mir transformed himself beautifully to take on each form. Music and dance were woven into the fabric of the play, which, although very funny, portrayed the plight of undocumented immigrants to the United States in a most poignant way.

Alberto Sánchez performed his puppet play, *Pirin Pin Pin y sus historias*, in the heat of the day near the UConn library. He brilliantly made his puppets act out the cautionary tale of cholera and the importance of washing your hands. Clearly accessible to children, this play was delightful also to adults. Sánchez had expressive puppeteering technique, fun and useful stories and excellent improvisational skills which made for a unique performance.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña of La Pocha Nostra gave two unforgettable performances, the first a monologue written for and premiered at this festival called *Mexterminator vs. Global Predator*. Gómez-Peña explored all sorts of symbols associated with the chicano world, starting with a crazy clothing combination which included cowboy boots, a kilt, sunglasses and a native American headdress and shield. He used a variety of props and hand movements and harangued, switching nimbly between Spanish and English, on hybridism, stereotypes, and politics. Some of the word plays were brilliant. Many of the images were over the top. And yet they were topped by the images he and Michelle Ceballos produced at *Mexótica* in a three hour

offering of performance art in the UConn art museum. Gómez-Peña and Ceballos alternated taking on different personas in images seemingly designed to shock as they interacted with audience members, and eventually used audience members to create a living tableau of odd personas.

A pair of short Argentine plays were performed back to back. Cristina Merelli performed a play she wrote entitled *The Shoes* about the crises Argentines have endured at the hands of the Dirty War and globalization. Anabella Valencia performed Augustina Cerviño's *Mi nombre es...* It explored the painful issue of identity in the wake of the Dirty War as the actress took on the personas of individuals whose parents disappeared.

The group Maskhunt from Puerto Rico performed *Arquearse*, a play by Deborah Hunt, a native of New Zealand who moved to Puerto Rico in 1990. The play, in which Hunt also performed, featured expressive masks, exaggerated costumes, pre-recorded dialogue, slide projections and stylized acting. The storyline, a bit of a "thriller," was inspired by a true incident of "biopiracy."

Finally, two groups performed translations of plays not from their native countries. The group (E)xperiência subterranea, from Florianópolis, Brazil, performed *O líquido tátil* by Argentine playwright Daniel Veronese. Performed in Portuguese, this comedy explored family relationships, focusing on a married couple and the husband's sister. The play was indeed funny, with compulsive smoking, histrionic fits and obvious wigs. Beneath the jocular surface, however, it was clear that the characters were suffering. After a long run in Mexico, LATT '05 witnessed the final performance of *Máquina Hamlet: Vía cruces con transeúntes* by the group Artillería. This play consisted primarily of a brilliant series of images performed by Diana Fidelia and Rodolfo Blanco with a metal ladder as their only prop, but used in a variety of ways. Lacking a story line per se, the various scenes were often repetitive and stylized and required tremendous expressivity, agility, strength and timing on the part of the actors. Lacking a formal ending with audience applause, the actors stayed on the stage in their final poses under the watchful eye of audience members for a good half an hour.

And so we answer the question that no one wanted to have to face after the excellent conferences/festivals held in Kansas over the years: Can LATT survive in any other environment? The answer is a resounding yes! And in this occasion it not only survived, but thrived.

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