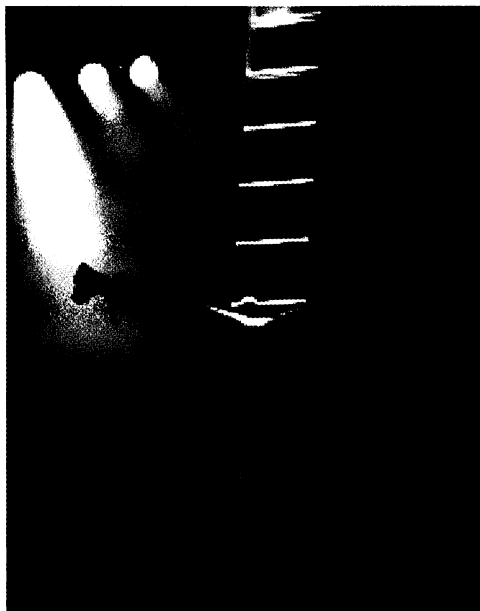


Mexico City's Spring 2005 Theatre Season

Timothy G. Compton

Mexico City's theatre world continues to magically renew itself. Somehow, despite dire concerns about lack of funding for the arts under the Vicente Fox administration, predated by concerns about lack of funding for the arts under the Ernesto Zedillo administration, the number of plays produced in Mexico City continues similar to prior years and the best plays seem as original and relevant and aesthetically pleasing as ever. In one concrete note of progress, this season saw the opening of a theatre space that promises to be an important one. On March 14, UNAM's Centro Universitario del Teatro officially opened a new building which virtually doubles the school's size in square footage and provides an excellent, complementary experimental black box theatre space to its existing Foro with its traditional Elizabethan stage.

Several of this season's finest plays featured settings outside of Mexico. *¿Dónde estaré esta noche?*, written by Claudio Valdés Kuri and Maricarmen Gutiérrez and directed by Valdés Kuri, was set in France and revisited the story of Joan of Arc. The set, designed by Valdés Kuri and Igor Lozada, was nearly non-existent yet spectacular at the same time. Performed at the Juan Ruiz de Alarcón theatre, the audience bypassed the usual seating and sat on two facing sets of risers on the stage, as if it were a sporting event. Two details made the set spectacular. First, in a coronation scene, large black cloths behind spectators on each side dropped away, revealing stunning "stained glass windows" which transported spectators instantly into a Gothic cathedral. Second, in a battle scene, the space between the spectators was transformed into water through smoke and blue lights, and the French "traversed the river" by a pair of "bridges" – tall ladders cleverly secured to the risers within inches of spectators on one side of the "river" and dropped violently across the divide to the other side. (For technical specifications, see the company website: www.ciertoshabitantes.com.) Enormous Swiss horns



¿Dónde estaré esta noche?

Foto: José Jorge Carreón

on the French side and bagpipes on the British side sounded the battle, and smoke combined with red and yellow lights in effective patterns. The ladders also served as towers up which characters scurried to gain better views. In the middle of this chaos Juana rallied the troops by word and by magnificently singing old Negro spirituals. It was by far the most riveting scene of battle I have ever seen. Interaction with audience members was magical, and guaranteed that each performance would be unique. First of all, most of the actors were planted among the audience members at the beginning of the show, and did not reveal themselves as actors until

after a little play within the play, when one of them answered his cell phone and another scolded him angrily about it. One by one, actors in the audience surprisingly took to the stage, and then they cajoled authentic audience members onto the stage in three different scenes. In one such scene, selected authentic audience members were conscripted along with actual actors into the army on the stage. Their superior then started to insult each one military boot camp style, obviously impromptu, for example calling one bushy-haired spectator “Cabeza de Brócoli.” Juana then took over with a completely different approach, sweetly talking to and encouraging each one. Many of the actors sang in a variety of vocal styles, and always beautifully. The acting of all the cast was uniformly great, but the performance of María Teresa Dal Pero in the role of Juana was transcendental. She filled the theatre with goodness and faith and tenderness. Her vocal range was astonishing and the anguish she projected prior to her death seemed almost tangible. Although the situation belonged to Medieval France, occasional references to current events suggested that this play had an eye on the present, calling all to live

authentically and with principles. This play once again validates de positive international reputation Valdés Kuri and his group have established.

For at least the third time, Luis de Tavira directed what was listed as a “versión libre de Luis de Tavira” of *La honesta persona de Sechuán*, three and a half hours of superb epic theatre. Although the play was set in the Orient and characters retained their Chinese names, the message of the play was clearly targeted to Mexico. The acting was highly stylized, involving complex and exacting choreography, high energy and sweeping, big movements. At times actors practically had to be contortionists. The cast carried out to perfection the corporal timing between characters, at times to do segments in unison, and at times to play off each other. Some members of the cast also sang beautifully. The rest of the cast performed with excellence, but I would point out that Karina Díaz played the lead to perfection, Mauricio Pimentel’s rendition of the grotesquely overweight but nimble barber was pure delight, and the scene in which Marco Antonio García portrayed remarkable acrobatics as Wang inside a drainage pipe was outstanding. All actors donned grotesque, expressive masks and cartoonish, exaggerated costumes. The set was pure genius, designed by Philippe Amand, who has recently received international recognition for his work. In this case, the set consisted of various sets, but most of the action took place in the tobacco shop of the title character, which at first was presented as a simple store front. Later the front came off and spectators were treated to seeing the inside of the shop as if going in the front door, but in a type of bas relief, with the store being on a ramp which made all the characters interact in very close proximity one to another. Next, in full view of the audience, the store rotated on a turntable to reveal the same store but from the perspective of the left side of the store, and later on the turntable rotated again to show the action from the right. Another scene suggested an entire neighborhood simply with doors, but behind each door was an actor and the doors did a beautifully choreographed routine. Each door had an imbedded tiny door through which the actors would speak. Later some of the doors were incorporated into storefronts. Seeing the multiple variations of the set alone would have been worth the price of admission, especially because the scene changes were part of the spectacle. A live orchestra provided both music and live sound effects, and even did a bit of acting, raising umbrellas when rain sounded on the stage. De Tavira’s adaptation of the play worked very well and the message of the play was indeed applicable to Mexico – to rise above corruption and pettiness and act with integrity, looking out for your fellow beings. My

only question related to this masterpiece (and *¿Dónde estará esta noche?*) is, why wasn't every seat filled?

El capote: abre los ojos al éxito, written and directed by Antonio Castro, was one of the funniest plays I have seen. Based on the short story by Nikolai Gogol, it portrayed events of the life of Akaki Akakievich Bashmachkin, whose dreary, pathetic bureaucratic existence as a full-time operator of a photocopier was transformed when he bought a new coat – people noticed it and as a result he became a bit of a social butterfly. When it was stolen, he committed suicide rather than suffer the shame of returning to his old coat. Rodrigo Vázquez played Akaki beautifully, making the functionary with no ambition and no future seem absolutely real, and then showing his surprise and nerdy delight at receiving recognition for his coat. Diego Jáuregui and Clarissa Malheiros, however, stole the show, each playing upwards of twenty varied, hysterical characters. Jáuregui in particular deserves kudos, perhaps because his characters were stronger and more memorable than those played by Malheiros. One of his finest was the bulging eyes, glasses-hanging-on-a-chain, cud-chewing, lazy-faced tailor in underpants who took Akaki's order. In another role, as a stone-faced Greek Orthodox priest, he delivered the baby Akaki (with a squirt of water to the face) and immediately launched into the baby's baptismal rites. At times he and Malheiros switched from role to role, with complete costume changes, at breakneck speed, always adjusting magically to the new character. In one five-minute stretch each must have taken on ten characters. Mónica Raya, incidentally, designed the delightful costumes which were so crucial to the character changes, and she also designed the very effective set. Although the set was nothing more than a rundown office, changes in lights and small props transformed the space, with the generous help of spectator imagination, into a hospital, a church, a tailor's shop, the street and a home. Some of the set's elements helped to entertain. For example, when an office worker opened the drawer of the file cabinet, the drawer was twice as long as the cabinet was deep. The photocopy machine from the office was used as an iron in the tailor's shop. A desk from the office doubled as a hospital bed in the maternity unit, and later was an oven in a home. Upon drawing a set of blinds at the back of the stage, spectators first found the office of the supervisor, then a bathroom, and finally conference room. Although this may be a case of "you had to see it to get it," I must mention that one of the funniest scenes I have ever seen featured two of the actors, stone-faced, making a ridiculous little

doll, dressed like Akaki, “perform” as if he were a rock star, the song “Cuando tengo fe, tengo éxito.” This play was highly entertaining, but it was also serious, giving a cautionary portrayal of a society in decay, heavy in useless bureaucracy, overly focused on clothing and lacking in values.

Mexico’s deaf theatre company, *Seña y Verbo*, performed a triptych of short plays on the subject of deafness under the title *¡PAAH!: tres historias para ser escuchadas*. Alberto Lomnitz, who founded and directs *Seña y Verbo*, commissioned three mini-plays on the subject of deafness, and then Lomnitz directed them in *¡PAAH!* The floor level of the set in the Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz consisted of 25 metallic-looking squares with the option of lighting from below. Behind them, on the wall, was a set of matching panels which was used as a projection screen at times, at other times became transparent and allowed for performance on a second level, and even raised and lowered to create different spaces. The first piece, *Palabras necias*, by Flavio González Mello, lasted 41 minutes and focused on the conflict between students at a school for the deaf and the school’s administrators. Realistic in tone and presentation, it portrayed how the very system which should help the deaf actually becomes an obstacle. The second piece, by Víctor Weinstock, called *Otra fábula sombría*, lasted twenty-nine minutes and served as a



¡PAAH!: Otra fábula sombría. Foto: Andea López



¡PAAH!: *El infante*. Foto: Andrea López

stinging denunciation of Mexican government and policy regarding deaf individuals, who are practically branded mentally deficient. It was abstract and dense in its language and thematics, but brilliant visually, due to stunning, bright, color-coordinated costumes, highly choreographed interactions between characters, extensive use of the lighting grid from below, live percussion, and occasional pauses to examine a computer-generated projection of the mini-play's outline on the screen behind the actors. The third piece, *El infante*, by David Olguín, which lasted thirty-nine minutes, featured a middle-aged man waking up as a child in a dream-like world named "Sordópolis," in which the general population was deaf and his spoken communication required an interpreter. It turned out that Sordópolis was indeed a dream, and when he awoke from it his attitude toward deaf acquaintances was drastically more compassionate. ¡PAAH! said much more about deafness by having three separate miniplays than it could have said through one long play. Further, the variety in tone, color, approach and implications for deafness made seeing it a very rich experience.

Un pañuelo el mundo es, written and directed by Juan Carlos Vives, was a brilliantly quirky, fast-paced piece performed by five actresses on the

subject of human relations and life's coincidences, hence the title. Ingrid Sac designed a simple set on which the action took place – an arena style space with spectators on both sides of the stage, which consisted of a floor about twelve by eight feet, then three risers on the flanks. The play's action was a social gathering at the home of Anamar, a divorcee worry wart. She invited four people who supposedly did not know each other. They included Gilda, played by Haydeé Boetto, a frivolous, incessantly talkative person married, it turned out, to Anamar's ex-husband. Yolanda was a professor and intellectual who happened to have been Gilda's favorite teacher. Claudia was Anamar's cynical sister, but turned out to be Yolanda's lover. And the final guest, Silvia, played hilariously by Julieta Ortiz, turned out to be a high-powered sales associate for Avon products who tried to hijack the entire gathering for her business dealings. As the get together progressed, coincidences boiled to the surface, usually revealing prevarication and underhandedness, and the event evolved into fisticuffs and attempted murder. The acting included beautiful choreography and required that the actresses play off each other. Visually *Un pañuelo* was delightful because of the costumes, designed by Pilar Boliver, with each character decked out in a different color, with everything matching, including shoes, purse, and earrings. Silvia, appropriately, was in business blue, Yolanda in power red, Claudia in sensual green, Anamari in colorless beige, and Gilda in frivolous orange. Although the ending resolved itself too easily, this was a fine play with a message about the dangers of not being authentic.

Miguel Angel Canto directed a hilarious production of *Muerte accidental de un anarkista*, listed as “piratería subversiva de la obra de Dario Fo.” The tone was set even before entering the theatre, as actors played to spectators outside the theatre as they stood in line. “Police” loudly apprehended the “anarchist” after he had distributed “subversive” materials to the crowd. Once on the actual stage, the actors never left it. In fact, they sometimes even became part of the minimalist set, playing things such as file cabinets or coat racks. In that same mode, the audience had to use its imagination in many of the play's images. All walls and doors, for example, were purely imaginary. Another example: in one scene a character “jumped out a window” toward the front of the stage. Several characters at the back of the stage pretended to be at the base of the building waiting to catch him. Eventually the character did a back handspring into their grasp. Often, as one character would tell a story, other characters would act out the scene behind. Many of the actors took on several roles, but Paulo Sergio Galindo,



Muerte accidental de un anarkista.

Foto: Gilberto Moreno

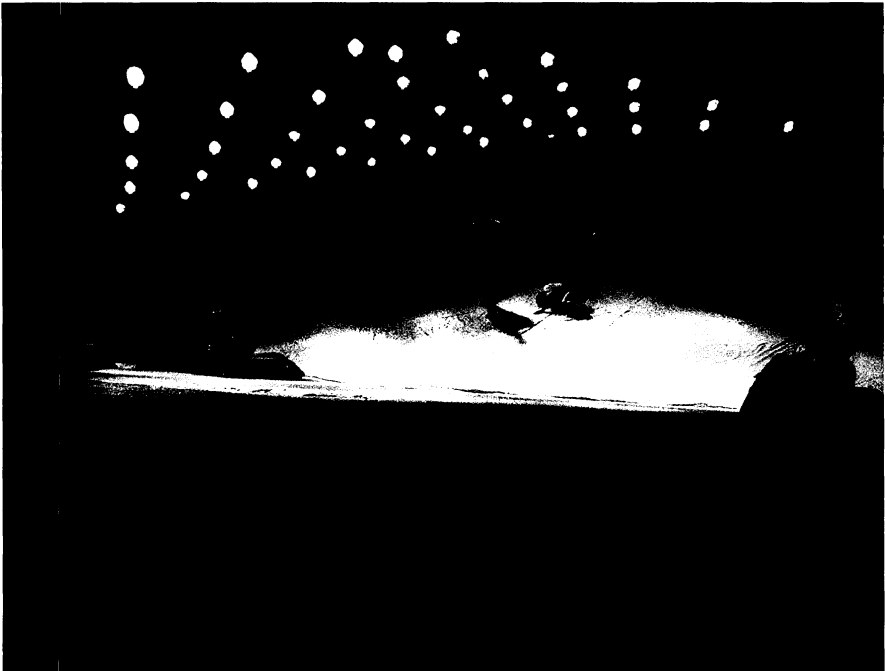
playing the “loco,” took on many roles with the gusto and savvy of a classic *pícaro*. His performance was masterful, particularly in his linguistic dexterity, much of which seemed to be improvised. The topic was applicable to Mexico in that the play uncovered corruption at various levels of the justice system. Furthermore, the translation/adaptation used very Mexican Spanish and made numerous references to contemporary Mexico.

El pregonero de Toledo was performed on and around

the “Carro de la Comedia” on the open air plaza next to UNAM’s main theatres. Written by Ilya Cazés and directed by José María Mantilla, this was a delightful adaptation of the story of Lazarillo de Tormes. The premise was an Inquisition trial against an aged Lazarillo, played by Ginés Cruz, for writing his autobiography. Scenes from the book came to life as they were discussed in court. The young Lazarillo, played nimbly by Ixchel Sánchez Balmori, relived the famous scenes with the blind man, the cleric, and the nobleman, intertwining their humor and suffering. Although most of the play maintained a 16th century Spanish feel, the character of the Escudero was brilliantly adapted to 20th century Mexico. Played by Luis Leshner, he wore sunglasses and chic black leather pants sporting flamboyant zippers. He spoke constantly on his cell phone, used the hippest of Mexican slang, strutted like a peacock, and projected an attitude of owning the world. After the play, the actors collapsed all of the props and costumes and elements of the set onto what had been the main stage, a storage unit on wheels which sat on the plaza when not in use. During the play, actors could emerge or withdraw through openings in fabric at the back of the unit, onto the stage through several trap doors, often accompanied by colored smoke, out the front of the unit’s base through trap doors, or around either side of the Carro, which they sometimes did on stilts. It was a spectacle not unlike a circus at times, which

included actors chasing children away who wandered too near the stage. Old Lazarillo thoroughly enjoyed reliving his past episodes but was eventually found guilty of heresy and condemned to anonymity in a lively, bombastic edict. *El pregonero* followed much of the story of the classic novel, but more importantly, did so with a wonderfully picaresque tone.

David Olguín wrote and directed *Clipperton*, a play based on an obscure and fascinating episode of Mexican history when Mexico held the Pacific island named Clipperton early in the twentieth century. The striking set consisted of a large white platform made up of various ramps and variations in grade. The platform took up a majority of the enormous stage area of the Galeón theatre, and served first as a ship during a boisterous storm, and then as the desert island itself. The thematic involved civilization and barbarism, and one wonders whether the Clipperton experience may be a metaphor for Mexico herself. Although it was visually beautiful and had fine acting, *Clipperton's* plot was confusing and dragged along at times.



Clipperton. Foto: Dana Giampaolo.

Felipe Galván directed a compelling trilogy of plays which approached the topic of exile from several angles in the Foro Contigo América. It included Argentine Susana Pujol's dense and cerebral *Cautiva*, Spaniard Guillermo Heras Toledo's moving look at the fallout of the Spanish Civil war in *Sinaia*, and Galván's memorable examination of expatriates (in this case from Uruguay) living in Mexico after fleeing political violence in *Nunca para siempre*. Performed on a minimalist set, this trilogy required that the small group of actors change roles convincingly at a moment's notice.

Roberto Vásquez and his group Utopía Urbana continue to perform amazing numbers of performances in non-mainstream venues. I saw them perform *No hacen falta alas* in the Foro Abierto de la Casa del Lago in Chapultepec park to a crowd of about 150. This was actually a *pastorela* Vásquez wrote last year and his group started performing in December, but which they have continued to perform with great regularity – over 50 performances by the time I saw it in March. It featured the obligatory devil and angel of the stock *pastorelas*, but also a boxer, a clown, and several other circus-type characters who captivated the audience.

Other plays treated a panorama of topics in a range of styles and in a rich variety of venues. Mexico City's spring 2005 theatre season shows that it continues to have great vitality, creativity, artistry and relevance.

Northern Michigan University



La honesta persona de Sechuán. Foto: Dana Giampaolo