

## Farewell to Benavente in Mexico

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There was a flurry of critical attention dedicated to Nobel Prize winner Jacinto Benavente in Mexico around the time of his death in 1954. For over half a century plays by Benavente were presented in Mexico by Mexican companies as well as by touring Spanish companies. An examination of Enrique Olavarría y Ferrari's *Reseña histórica del teatro en México* reveals how frequently Benaventian plays from different periods of his writing were represented. In fact, the Spanish dramatist had himself brought a company to Mexico in 1922 as part of a tour of Latin America. However, rather than tracing the course of Benaventian theatre in Mexico, I wish to examine some of the critical opinions expressed in that country in the early 1950's regarding the noted playwright.

Mexico City theatregoers had several opportunities to view major productions of Benavente's plays in the early 1950's. They saw *La malquerida* in 1950, *Mater Imperatrix* in 1953, and *La malquerida, Su amante esposa, Cuando los hijos de Eva no son los hijos de Adán*, and *Los intereses creados* in 1954. The last four were staged in two *homenajes* to Benavente after his death. The reactions of critics to these five plays could not have varied more. From some, the plays elicited paeans; for others, even after Benavente's death, his work was not worthy of praise. The witty Spanish playwright had, according to a number of critics, made the mistake of outliving his own days of glory, but his impact had been considerable.

*Mater Imperatrix*, no comedy to be sure, was performed by the company of the Casa de la Risa in the old Teatro Ideal with a cast including Anita Blanch and Francisco Jambrina. It must be remembered that the Casa de la Risa had fallen into disrepute among the critics because of the company's poor choice of plays and occasional lack of rehearsal. The plays staged there represented the outmoded theatre, usually traditional Spanish plays which often entertained the public but which Mexican playwrights wished to replace with

their own plays, plays with Mexican themes which would be more meaningful, they felt, for the audience.

In the early 1950's in Mexico the word "renacimiento" began to appear in theatre columns in newspapers and magazines, and the amount of critical attention devoted to the theatre increased notably. Since in Mexico, as in other Latin American countries, writers often can live only by multiple activities, occasionally playwrights are critics and critics try their hand at playwriting. Thus we find in this decade the younger critics—sometimes playwrights—viewing the dramatic fare of the period along with their veteran colleagues, some of whom also wrote an occasional play. Among the younger playwright critics were Wilberto Cantón and Sergio Magaña. Older playwright critics were Fernando Mota (a Spaniard who had spent over thirty years in Mexico) and Rafael Solana. Antonio Magaña Esquivel, primarily a critic, saw his first play, *Semilla del aire*, produced in 1956.

Upon viewing *Mater Imperatrix*, Arturo Perucho, the critic who preceded Antonio Magaña Esquivel on the magazine *Hispanoamericano* (called *Tiempo* in Mexico), was of the opinion that it was out-of-date; it had opened in Spain in 1950. If the play had been presented in 1900, he affirmed, it would have won acclaim as a modern work. The play deals with the strongwilled mother of the title and her relationship with the wife of her son who is a noted violinist. Furthermore, according to Perucho, in addition to being dated, the play suffered from the well-known excesses of Benavente: discursive style, sententious speeches, and lapses into sentimentalism. The public received the play, Perucho thought, with the indifference that it deserved.<sup>1</sup>

The audience could hardly have been universally indifferent since *Mater Imperatrix* lasted over a month at the Teatro Ideal, a long run at that time. Fernando Mota, as he stated in his review, waited deliberately for the welcoming sanction of the audience before writing about the play. Mota did not display the same negative approach that Perucho displayed. For Mota, everything about Benavente caused astonishment: his age, his enormous production, and his diverse genres. Mota compared *Mater Imperatrix* to another Benavente work, *Cuando los hijos*, a play that had been staged in Mexico in 1932. While Mota felt that the family in *Cuando los hijos* really seemed Jewish, in his opinion the *Mater Imperatrix* family is, rather, universal with Jewish overtones superimposed in the form of Biblical quotations.<sup>2</sup>

The opinion of the co-editor of *El Redondel*, Alfonso Icaza, seemed to coincide with that of Mota in regard to the universality of the mother in the play. According to Icaza, "Don Jacinto enaltece a una madre judía, que es tan madre como la más santa de las cristianas, y de paso, expone las humillaciones de que ha sido víctima esa raza en todos los países, circunstancia que aprovecha para alabar a la España de sus amores."<sup>3</sup> But the sharptongued Benavente never could resist an occasional jibe at Spaniards or foreigners (his treatment of the American wife in the play illustrates this clearly), and Sigfredo Gordón Carmona was justified in pointing this out: "Es en total un magnífico elogio del pueblo judío aunque con alusiones esporádicas no del todo gratas y por ella también muy benaventianas."<sup>4</sup>

In Magaña Esquivel's opinion, *Mater Imperatrix* contained elements char-

acteristic of much of Benavente's theatre: scant action, much sermonizing, maintenance of the three unities, strong portrayal of the principal feminine character, and generally skilled use of dramatic recourses. *Mater Imperatrix* was, he felt, a magnificent play by a dramatist who even in his eighties had universal appeal. According to the critic, Benavente was so dramatically efficacious that even the mediocre direction of Julián Duprez and a disastrous performance by Anita Blanch could not ruin the work.<sup>5</sup>

Mota's opinion as to the quality of *Mater Imperatrix* differed from Magaña Esquivel's. As Mota phrased it, "es un folletín melodramático, con la calidad superior que le presta la jerarquía de su autor." According to Mota, whatever theatrical genre the Nobel Prize winner undertook, he always remained Benavente. Mota did feel that *Mater Imperatrix* was higher in quality than the usual offering at the Teatro Ideal.

Two years later, in 1954, Wilberto Cantón, angered by the slurs Sergio Magaña and Emilio Carballido—all three were budding Mexican playwrights at the time—had been casting at Benavente, praised the structural excellence of Benavente's plays, their good dialogue, and fine feminine characterization. No one now would think of putting on plays by Benavente in the Caracol or Arlequín (two of the *teatros de bolsillo* popular in Mexico in the 1950's), Cantón affirmed, but he felt that the works of Benavente as a heritage of the Spanish-speaking world should not be forgotten. He believed that since, through the efforts of Alvaro Custodio (director of the Teatro Clásico de México), Mexicans were seeing some of the classics of Spanish theatre, it would be well to revive the repertory of Benaventian plays that the parents and grandparents of the younger generation in Mexico had enjoyed.<sup>6</sup>

Something similar occurred sooner, perhaps, than Cantón expected. With the death of Benavente on July 15, 1954, thoughts of at least some actors and producers in Mexico turned toward the idea of an *homenaje* to Benavente, and in the case of a playwright, nothing could be more appropriate than showing a representative group of his plays. It was announced that María Tereza Montoya (she preferred to spell her name with a "z") and her company would stage several works by the eminent Spaniard in August and September. Montoya chose three works from different periods of Benavente's production: *La malquerida*, 1913 (opening date in Spain), *Cuando los hijos*, 1931, and *Su amante esposa*, 1950.

The names of two Mexican actresses stand out in connection with Benaventian theatre: Virginia Fábregas and María Tereza Montoya were known for their performances in his plays in Spain and in Mexico. Virginia Fábregas died in 1950, but María Tereza Montoya carried on her own tradition of appearing in Benavente plays in the 1950's. Raimunda, in *La malquerida*, was a role long in the repertory of Montoya. *La malquerida*, a rural drama, deals with the relationship of Raimunda, her second husband Esteban, and his love for her marriageable daughter, Acacia. At play's end, Esteban shoots Raimunda and, as she expires on stage, most audiences through the years have been unable to contain their tears at performances of the play. María Tereza chose to play Raimunda the last night at the Teatro Virginia Fábregas in 1950 before that edifice was to be torn down to make way for the new Teatro Fábregas. After

seeing her then the Spanish refugee critic, Angel de las Bárcenas, was convinced that the role was one of her creations.<sup>7</sup> Miguel Guardia declared that those who were fortunate enough to see her performance would not forget it as long as they lived.<sup>8</sup>

Four years later, in 1954, Armando de Maria y Campos (he preferred to spell his name without an accent), the dean of Mexican critics, displayed a good amount of enthusiasm for Montoya as Raimunda. Of the dozen actresses he had seen in this part (including the famous Spanish actress María Guerrero), not one displayed the passion Montoya evoked for this role. According to Maria y Campos, the many actors and actresses in the audience the opening night at the Ideal were the first ones on their feet after the second act curtain, when María Tereza received fourteen curtain calls.<sup>9</sup>

Alfonso Icaza expressed less enthusiasm for María Tereza Montoya's acting than did Maria y Campos. Icaza's reservation was that Montoya's acting proved more effective in the quiet scenes than in those in which she gave too free rein to her dramatic temperament. Icaza, a great admirer of the Spanish playwright, was convinced that don Jacinto's theatre would never perish. Perhaps the most telling point that Icaza made in his discussion of the production of *La malquerida* had to do with the changing times and changing style of acting in the 1950's. Icaza mentioned that now players did not use a prompter. In the small theatres in vogue in the 1950's, the use of a prompter would have been incongruous, since the audience—along with the actor—would have heard the prompting.<sup>10</sup>

Maria y Campos rejoiced that the current cycle of works afforded the younger critics the opportunity of seeing plays by the Nobel Prize winner from different periods in his creation. These younger critics, Maria y Campos suggested, had reached maturity in an era when Benavente was shown infrequently in Mexico.<sup>11</sup> Principal among the reasons for not staging plays by Benavente during the 1940's was the political stance of Benavente after the Civil War in Spain, a political stance embracing the current regime that was not calculated to endear him to the many Spaniards living in exile in Mexico. Many of these Spaniards were prominent in the world of the theatre. Benavente and other playwrights were excluded for political reasons. Maria y Campos maintained, however, the view that it was indeed unfortunate to ignore completely an important portion of the Spanish-speaking theatre for political reasons.

Although Maria y Campos hoped that the younger critics would be favorably impressed by the current cycle of Benaventian plays, at least one of these younger commentators on theatre remained unfavorably impressed. Sergio Magaña (1924) adopted an impressionistic tongue-in-cheek manner of reviewing *La malquerida*. He referred to a statement by Emilio Carballido—his friend and fellow playwright with whom he had collaborated on occasion—to the effect that Lorca was a better playwright than Benavente. Lorca was, according to Magaña, next to Benavente “un vidrio junto a una estrella.” He said that even fate proved that Benavente was a better dramatist by decreeing that Lorca be shot and prolonging the life of Benavente.

Magaña summarized *La malquerida* humorously, concluding that the play suffered from wordiness. For him, it ended when dramatically it should begin. Furthermore, the work was conventional, sentimental, and completely alien to

the decade. After delivering these opinions, he turned his attention to the acting of María Tereza Montoya. He felt that she should not waste her talent on such a play. She might just as well read a poem called *Reir llorando* by Juan de Dios Peza. A great actress, in his opinion, should educate her audiences rather than cater to their vices.<sup>12</sup>

Sergio Magaña's review appeared earlier than the one by Maria y Campos. The two commentaries sound to the reader like a dialogue between the veteran critic and his younger colleague. Maria y Campos believed that Benavente's theatre would be alive for current generations of playgoers as well as for past generations; Magaña thought not. If the play began, as Magaña suggested, where the playwright had ended it, three characters (Esteban, Raimunda, and Acacia) would be facing a situation and working out a solution to the problem. There would be no melodramatic solution to Raimunda's dilemma. A realistic approach to a problem was more in keeping with the kind of play written by Mexican playwrights throughout the decade, and such a position by a young Mexican playwright was understandable. To the statement that Benavente should be judged within his period, Sergio Magaña would retort that Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristotle, Lope, and Shakespeare are alive for all generations. Magaña found that Benavente did not speak to his generation, a generation which in Mexico had acquired a whole new set of preoccupations.

Rafael Solana considered the current series of plays at the Teatro Ideal a test of whether or not audiences in the 1950's were interested in seeing plays in a relatively large theatre where there was a shell for the prompter and where a melancholy trio played between the acts of the play. When *La malquerida* opened, Solana thought that the oldest thing of all in the old Teatro Ideal was the play itself. He compared Benavente to a flyer who, though wonderful in his time, had been surpassed by modern flyers. He said that there were many contemporary playwrights who, while they were considered merely mediocre, could manage their characters with greater skill than Benavente had in *La malquerida*. Solana pointed out the scene in which there are three characters on stage and during fifteen minutes only two of them talk, as an example of inept craftsmanship. The critic for *Siempre* called on María Tereza Montoya to abandon this kind of theatre and do modern plays.<sup>13</sup>

Raimunda is one of Benavente's strong feminine characters, and in the first play of the *homenaje* to Benavente María Tereza Montoya had dominated the scene. But in the second play, *Cuando los hijos*, Ricardo Mondragón (the husband of Montoya and director of the company) played the most significant part, the role of Carlos Werner. The play is set in an international atmosphere in Switzerland, where composer Carlos Werner keeps part of his family, three daughters by two different unions; the play deals, in part, with incest. Discussion of the critics centered around his acting and the moral atmosphere of the play. There were mixed reactions to Mondragón's acting. More germane to this study than the quality of Mondragón's acting were critical comments on the moral atmosphere of the play. Icaza looked up his review of the play, when it was first staged in Mexico in 1932. He had asserted in 1932 (and he continued to assert in 1954) that Benavente had delved into social corruption for his subject matter in this play. In Icaza's opinion, Benavente enjoyed writing about morbid

passions. He acknowledged, however, the theatrical mastery of the dramatist in dealing with these themes.<sup>14</sup> In an interview in March, 1967, Icaza told the author of the present study that Benavente was still the Spanish playwright he most admired.

Solana also commented on the theme of social corruption. He pointed out that Mexicans had been scandalized when they first saw *Cuando los hijos*, but in the intervening years themes once considered unsuitable had been presented on Mexican stages. The public had seen such Mexican plays as Usigli's *Jano es una muchacha* and such foreign imports as Sartre's *La prostituta respetuosa*, and in Solana's opinion it was no longer easily scandalized. He noted that Benavente's theme of the 1930's is given comic treatment in the 1950's (in Sauvejon's *Los hijos de Eduardo*) to the delight of audiences in the capital.

Magaña Esquivel took the occasion of the *homenaje* to make a few general comments about Benavente's theatre. He affirmed that, despite outward differences, both *La malquerida* and *Cuando los hijos* belonged to the second of the three categories of Benavente's work as it was currently considered by the critics; he referred to psychological plays including rural dramas and character studies. (The other categories are social satire and plays based on imaginary tales.) In Magaña Esquivel's judgment, *Cuando los hijos* represented an advance in Benavente's handling of dialogue, but its weakness, when considered alongside *La malquerida*, was its lack of substance as well as its lack of a truly legitimate conflict.<sup>15</sup>

The last of the three *homenaje* plays, *Su amante esposa*, opened at the Teatro Ideal on September 9, 1954. The title indicates the spirit of the play, since Mario's wife Clara becomes his mistress. The play had first been shown in the Teatro Infanta Isabel in Madrid where it had run for 300 performances starting in 1950. Magaña Esquivel summed up well the way different people felt about the play when he observed that for some persons it was a surprise, for others, a satisfaction, and for still others, a disappointment. It was a surprise because it was an indication that Benavente was still versatile at the age of 84, and it was a satisfaction because of the freshness which the aged dramatist brought to a *boulevard* theme. *Su amante esposa* was, however, a disappointment to those who thought that Benavente had lowered himself in working on such a trivial theme. Magaña Esquivel appeared to include himself among the disappointed, for he declared that *Su amante esposa* was a play that only showed the dramatist's versatility; the work did not provide a particularly fitting role for María Tereza Montoya.<sup>16</sup>

Benavente did infuse a good amount of freshness into a *boulevard* play and, as Icaza indicated, the play was skillfully contrived. He thought that *Su amante esposa* was amusing—an example of Benavente's "kicking up his heels" at 84.<sup>17</sup> Angel de las Bárcenas added that *Su amante esposa* was a successful production of the kind of play that used to be seen regularly in the Teatro Infanta Isabel in Madrid.<sup>18</sup>

Solana also spoke of the play with considerable enthusiasm. A few weeks earlier in reviewing *La malquerida*, Solana had judged that Benavente was now formally dead, although he had died creatively a long time ago. Now he pointed out that it was a consoling thought for young authors that, if they

managed to reach Benavente's age, they might hope to write a play as pleasing and as amusing as the calumniated don Jacinto had. The play combined, in Solana's opinion, an able mixture of French *boulevard* theatre with Spanish humor. The first two acts were particularly skillfully written; in the third act Benavente moralized and this act was, according to Solana, the poorest of the three.<sup>19</sup> It is not surprising that the light touch in the first two acts of *Su amante esposa* impressed Solana. As Solana himself began writing plays in the 1950's, it became increasingly evident that the lighthearted vein was his forte, as his *Debiera haber obispas* and *Cuna de héroes* show.

The last work of Benavente to be presented in 1954 was *Los intereses creados*, considered by many to be his masterpiece. This is Benavente's *com-media dell'arte* play with philosophical overtones set in an imaginary land in the seventeenth century. A few days before the closing of *Su amante esposa* on September 15, a second *homenaje* began in another theatre, the Teatro de los Insurgentes, with *Los intereses creados*. The critics, most of whom were familiar with the work, focused their attention on the production rather than on the play itself. They found, in general, that the setting and costumes were superior to the acting. The production stressed the visual beauty of the play and made it seem like a ballet.

On the whole, *Los intereses creados* was presented as the dramatist had written it, and his wishes in choosing a woman for the part of Leandro were respected with Lucy Gallardo giving, the critics found, a rather cold performance as the *galán*. The young director, Raúl Cardona, had made only a few changes in the work. Ordinarily, Silvia spoke both the Prologue and Epilogue. Cardona had assigned both of these speeches to Crispín, played by the veteran actor Francisco Jambrina. Instead of delivering the Prologue against a closed curtain, Crispín gave the Prologue against a transparent silk curtain, behind which the audience could glimpse the other players assuming the attitudes of puppets.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, for a brief period in 1952 and for another in 1954, critical attention in Mexico centered on a dramatist whom Bárcenas called the "Segundo Fénix de los Ingenios." This is how the critic referred to Benavente when he spoke of his death in 1954. At least four of the old master's plays, according to Bárcenas, *La noche del sábado*, *Señora ama*, *La malquerida*, and *Los intereses creados* were of high quality, and of the four, his masterpiece was *Los intereses creados*.<sup>21</sup> Magaña Esquivel declared that the whole Spanish-speaking world was moved by the loss of its most prestigious theatrical figure.<sup>22</sup>

For Juan Tomás, Benavente was a great author whose work always aroused discussions.<sup>23</sup> Magaña Esquivel summed up the playwright's importance when he said that Benavente had reformed the Spanish theatre but had gone out of style because he had repeated himself. Even so, he could not be ignored. He served as a point of reference in the contemporary Spanish theatre. One talked of theatre before or after Benavente; in referring to young authors, one spoke of their work as Benaventian in style or anti-Benaventian.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

1. Arturo Perucho, *Hispanoamericano*, XX, núm. 508 (28 enero 1952), 57.
2. Fernando Mota, *Revista de Revistas*, núm. 2,188 (17 febrero 1952), 84.
3. Alfonso de Icaza, *El Redondel*, 2ª sección (13 enero 1952), p. 14.
4. Sigfredo Gordón Carmona, *México al Día* (1 febrero 1952), p. 61.
5. Antonio Magaña Esquivel, *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*, núm. 252 (27 enero 1952), 13.
6. Wilberto Cantón, *Siempre*, núm. 56 (17 julio 1954), 26-27. For commentary on Custodio's work see E. M. Dial, "Spanish Classical Theatre in Mexico in the 1950's," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 4/2 (Spring 1971), 29-38.
7. Angel de las Bárcenas, *Claridades*, 2ª sección, núm. 531 (5 marzo 1950), 24.
8. Miguel Guardia, *México en la Cultura*, núm. 58 (12 marzo 1950), 24.
9. Armando de María y Campos, *Novedades*, 1ª sección (24 agosto 1954), p. 17.
10. Icaza, *El Redondel*, 2ª sección (22 agosto 1954), p. 4.
11. María y Campos, *Novedades*, 1ª sección (31 agosto 1954), p. 19. For a discussion of Benavente's political stance see one of the recent works on him by Marcelo Peñuelas, *Jacinto Benavente* (New York, 1968).
12. Sergio Magaña, *Mañana*, núm. 574 (28 agosto 1954), 4.
13. Rafael Solana, *Siempre*, núm. 63 (8 septiembre 1954), 50-51.
14. Icaza, *El Redondel*, 2ª sección (29 agosto 1954), p. 14.
15. Magaña Esquivel, *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*, núm. 388 (5 septiembre 1954), 13.
16. *Ibid.*, 393 (10 octubre 1954), p. 13.
17. Icaza, *El Redondel*, 2ª sección (12 septiembre 1954), p. 14.
18. Bárcenas, *Claridades*, 2ª sección (12 septiembre 1954), p. 21.
19. Solana, *Siempre*, núm. 65 (22 septiembre 1954), 48-49. He wrote that he liked the plays written by young Mexicans, "pero cuando me siento a escribir, no me sale nada nuevo, me salen comedias tradicionales, apegadas, dijo Luisa Josefina Hernández, en una conferencia, a la antigua escuela española, comedias que le gustan a don Aquiles Elorduy, y que aprueba la Legión Mexicana de Decencia." *Siempre*, núm. 115 (7 septiembre 1955), 34.
20. Magaña Esquivel, *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*, núm. 393 (10 octubre 1954), 13.
21. Bárcenas, *Claridades*, 2ª sección (25 julio 1954), p. 15.
22. Magaña Esquivel, *Hispanoamericano*, XXV, núm. 638 (26 julio 1954), 38.
23. Juan Tomás, *El Redondel*, 2ª sección (18 julio 1954), p. 3. Later Tomás was to write: "El Benavente de los últimos tiempos no fue, lo confieso, santo de mi absoluta devoción; pero cuando veo hoy a la categoría de obras maestras, me reconcilio de pleno con el autor de *La malquerida*." *El Redondel*, 2ª sección (10 febrero 1957), p. 3.
24. Magaña Esquivel, *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*, núm. 388 (5 septiembre 1954), 13.