THEATRE NOTES

A Traditional Southwest Colonial Christmas Pageant

DONALD R. WADLEY

The Spanish medieval Christmas pageant *Las posadas* was already a tradition in Spain longer than any living person could remember when Columbus first stepped ashore in the New World.[1] The pageant found its way across the Atlantic early in the colonization and played its role in the conquest and Christianization of "las indias del oeste." However, of all the Spanish medieval and Golden Age theatre that visited the New World no single play seems to have caught the imagination and interest of the American as did *Las posadas*. Every country, including our own Southwest, has many versions of the pageant, as different from one another as are the regions where they are found, and each similar in retelling the ancient tale of a worried husband trying desperately to find shelter for his wife so that she may give birth to Jesus, the new hope for mankind.

For three hundred years, *Las posadas* has been performed in hamlets, villages and urban *barrios* with the same regularity and excited anticipation of Christmas itself. Arthur Campa in 1934 assures us that in New Mexico the Christmas drama was still being done; however, the more eager participation seems to have been in the rural areas rather than in the urban ones.[2] Even so, in the twentieth century the traditional Christmas pageant declined rapidly; the quiet, quaint performances reminiscent of more orderly eras were an endangered species.

In 1973 the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Colorado proposed to initiate an annual Southwest Colonial Christmas Pageant, *Las posadas*. Many universities have annual Christmas pageants, most of them from the Anglo-American tradition, but *Las posadas* is as ancient as American drama itself. The initiation of an Hispanic Christmas tradition reflects the Spanish Department's sense of responsibility toward the Colorado community and the Southwest generally, which enjoys a continuum of Hispanic culture still manifested in the large and vital Hispanic population of this region.

Several versions of *Las posadas* are available. However, we felt that it would be more in the spirit of the tradition itself to compose our own text. Written in contemporary Spanish prose, it is divided into episodes for mounting on small stages such as those used in Spanish *corrales* and *plazas*. It is a pageant, but the staging is simple and direct so that non-Spanish speakers can follow the well-known story and enjoy it. The performers are students of Spanish, not necessarily trained or experienced actors. This serves several purposes: 1) learning dialogue in a play is another method of improving students' mastery of the Spanish language; 2) mounting a drama in this manner demonstrates the staging of medieval Spanish drama; 3) authenticity is served by the use of amateur actors.[3]

Music has been part of religious European drama since the *Quem Quaeritis* trope,[4] and we must guess that the traditional Southwestern productions of *Las posadas* in centuries past also included music. We included songs from the San Luis Valley in Colorado which were either traditionally sung at Christmas time, or so popular in the Southwest that it was a natural choice to include them. The songs chosen were the following: 1) "The Joy of Las Posadas," 2) "Paloma Blanca," 3) "Vamos Todos a Belén," 4) "Noche de Paz," 5) "Las Mañanitas." This last one is a birthday song and fits very well in celebrating Christ's birth. The first song is still used in many places as the text of a musical *Las posadas* in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

The *ambiente* in which a pageant is presented is very important. In the enormous Glenn Miller Ballroom at the University of Colorado, we were able to create an informal atmosphere for *Las posadas*. The audience was seated at round tables placed throughout the ballroom, and traditional Southwestern foods were served. The six *posadas*, mobile stages six feet by eight and twenty inches high, were arranged in strategic positions so that they could be seen easily by everyone, and each spectator was close to at least one. Two thousand spectators hushed as Rafael the archangel announced the opening of the first annual Southwestern Colonial Christmas Pageant.

For an hour the public listened and watched Joseph and Mary plead with unsympathetic innkeepers for *posada*. A chorus representing pilgrims accompanies them in their search, singing *villancicos* to guitar accompaniment as they trudge between *posadas*, winding in, out and around the public from one end of the ballroom to the other. In song they beg for shelter which had just been denied in dialogue. The archangel chases Satan from inn to inn trying to stop him from influencing the innkeepers. At the last *posada* they meet face to face. A furious struggle ensues and the devil is hog-tied just as the Holy Family and the pilgrims arrive. When the gentle *posadero* and his wife understand who these strangers really are, and they realize that Satan himself has been beaten, at least for tonight, because of these strangers, they warmly welcome everyone. Mary is offered the manger because it is warmer and cleaner than their rented rooms which are occupied by the rough travelers who fill the city. As the angel opened the play, he also closes it with "This night a star will shine over the stable of a humble inn to show the place where Jesus, the Messiah, is born. The devil will return to his Hell. Come, all of the faithful! Come and adore him! God has given you His only son. Rejoice! Rejoice!" He runs out pulling Satan behind him. The chorus sings happily about *posada* that permits Jesus' birth. The pilgrims exit winding in between the tables as they have done all evening, singing "Las Mañanitas." The play is over, and a tradition as old as the Christ story in America has been born again.

Las posadas was a first for the University of Colorado, and a beginning for the Department of Spanish and Portuguese which has decided to include theatre in Spanish in its regular academic course of study. A student need only be able to work easily in Spanish in order to participate in the course. A play is chosen and is thoroughly studied as literature. Then it is studied dramatically for its staging possibilities. Parts are assigned and class time becomes rehearsal time. The play is mounted at the University. Time permitting, it is taken to other

universities, to nearby towns where Spanish is predominantly spoken, and to prisons where live entertainment is scarce. The Department has now offered Spanish language theatre for two years, and it is pleased with the results. Students improve their Spanish in an innovative manner; dramatic literature is taught from another point of view, and an intelligent entertainment is provided for the public. To date, the productions which have been mounted are *Auto de la compadecida*, a Brazilian farce by Suassuna; *Fando y Lis*, an Arrabal one-act absurdist play; *Pluft, el fantasmita*, a one-act children's play from Brazil; *Los invasores*, a Chilean drama about contemporary revolution, by Egon Wolff; and *Las posadas*, which will be presented again this year as the Third Annual Traditional Southwest Colonial Christmas Pageant.

University of Colorado, Boulder

Notes

1. Willis Knapp Jones, *Behind Spanish American Footlights* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), p. 461.
2. Arthur L. Campa, "Spanish Religious Folktheatre in the Southwest," *The University of New Mexico Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (June 1, 1934).
3. Arthur L. Campa, "Spanish Religious Folktheatre in the Southwest," *The University of New Mexico Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (June 15, 1934).
4. A. Nicoll, *World Drama* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950), p. 482.

Sexto Festival de los Teatros Chicanos

NICOLÁS KANELLOS

The Quinto Festival de los Teatros Chicanos, held in Mexico City the summer of 1974, was a mammoth and often chaotic affair involving over six hundred people and over seventy theatre groups from all over the Americas. Last year's *encuentro* with Latin America unfortunately brought to light many rifts, both political and artistic, not only among Chicano theatres but also among the Latin American groups. The close of the Mexico City festival was soon followed by battles between CLETA and Mascarones in Mexico as well as a coolness by some Chicano theatres toward the Teatro Campesino for ideological reasons.

In contrast to the havoc, the ideological attacks and counterattacks that characterized the Mexico City extravaganza, the July, 1975, Sexto Festival evidenced discipline, dedication, and a desire to heal the wounds opened by the previous year's encounter. Hosted by the Teatro de los Barrios of San Antonio, the festival had as its dominant theme "el encuentro con el barrio," a theme which maintained at a practical level the basic issue of Chicano theatre: the combination of art and political and social thought for a specific audience. But another issue was to lend a very sobering effect to the festivities: the farmworkers' struggle in California had reached crisis level and soon the theatre groups would be deeply involved in that struggle. Both concerns succeeded in unifying the diversified Chicano theatres at the TENAZ festival.

The Sexto Festival was the first to reflect in its design a fundamental practice

El fin del mundo, Teatro Campesino, San Juan Bautista.

in Chicano theatre: collective creativity. That is, the majority of Chicano theatres today create their own material as groups, and rarely perform plays written by playwrights, especially if they are not members of the group. The festival was truly to be created by the participants who were organized in brigades of three to five theatre groups. The respective brigades took turns serving meals, cleaning up the facilities, holding discussions, workshops, and critiques. Everyone shared in the work and success or failure of the festival.

Though the *barrio* is one of the main reasons for the existence of Chicano theatres, the Sexto Festival was the first to perform for *barrio* audiences and concentrate on performance for the *barrio* as a political and esthetic goal. In fact, on the first day of the festival, the brigades canvassed the neighborhoods in which they would be performing in order to distribute leaflets and personally invite the residents to the performance. Each theatre group performed twice: once in the community, and then again for the festival participants who were

sequestered away at the St. Joseph Retreat House of Oblate College. In this way the community performance was attended by a typical *barrio* audience rather than Chicano theatre *savants*. Finally on Saturday, the final day of the festival, five or six *teatros* performed in the open air at Brackenridge Park, a favorite gathering place of *Raza*. The critiques of the performances overwhelmingly concentrated on the particular theatre's ability to relate to the *barrio* audience.

November of 1975 officially marks the tenth anniversary of Chicano theatre; it was ten years ago that the Teatro Campesino was founded as a farmworkers' theatre in the fields of Delano, California. As such, many of the practitioners of *teatro* are now in their early thirties and raising families. The festival reflected maturity in conduct as well as in art. Hard work and discipline were evident not only in the performances but also in the limited partying.

Of the twenty-five *teatros* performing at the festival, four of the veteran theatres presented works which were indicative of this maturity and the desire to review the roads traveled during the last ten years. Their impact on the festival participants is bound to set trends for the coming year and solidify the professionalism that will ensure the future of Chicano theatre.

The festival opened with a rollicking and biting satire on the various stages of the Chicano student movement. *Los cuatro años de colegio*, by the Teatro Mestizo of San Diego, incorporated the elements that typify Chicano theatre, i.e., masks, *corridos*, fantasy, earthy humor, in a burlesque of Chicano militancy, women's liberation, Marxist-Leninism, and cultural nationalism. The *acto*'s black humor made light of the co-optation of Chicano leaders, hero-worship of revolutionaries like Che Guevara, and *machismo*. Throughout there was a sense of theatre within theatre that spoke directly to the festival participants who were seeing themselves satirized in their own medium.

The tenth year of Teatro Campesino's existence marks a return to its original style and function. César Chávez requested that the *teatro* help spread the word

El cuento de la migra, Teatro de la Gente, San José.

among the farmworkers about the do-or-die elections of an official union to represent farmworkers in California. As such they have developed a series of new *actos* in the old style: simple, short, humorous, proselytizing. Their brief dramatization of the farmworkers' battle with Gallo Wines was a model for the *teatros* at the festival, especially those who would soon place themselves at the service of the farmworkers' union.

A current issue that many of the theatres dramatized was that of the plight of the undocumented worker and his relationship to the domestic worker, especially the Chicano. The Teatro de la Gente's *El cuento de la migra* developed the theme best through a style very similar to that perfected by El Teatro Campesino in such works as *La gran carpa de los rascuachis.* The running narration through *corridos* gives the basic structure to this story of a wetback and his Chicano brothers fighting the forces of agri-business, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, inflation, etc. Quite effective use of masks, mime, and caricatures enriched this satire of the effects of capitalism on Mexican and Chicano workers.

Guadalupe, a documentary play created and presented by El Teatro de la Esperanza has brought the various elements of Chicano theatre to their perfection. The fluid style, the use of masks and mime, the creation of memorable caricatures, as well as the message and its impact make of this work a masterpiece of the genre. *Guadalupe*, now in its second year of performance, probably has the most demanding roles of any *acto* and the Teatro de la Esperanza exhibited the most outstanding execution of those roles. The performance was an example of the extreme discipline and dedication that Chicano theatre has achieved.

In summary, the Sexto Festival de los Teatros Chicanos exhibited a maturation of Chicano theatre as well as a consolidation of styles and a unity of spirit, if not ideology. Along with this maturation came too a new emphasis on preparation for the future, a call for the creation of more children's theatres and for more incorporation of children into Chicano theatre groups. This year's festival saw the return of Puerto Rican theatre groups from the East Coast and extensive participation of groups of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans from the Midwest. Expansion lies ahead. Future festivals may be held in Chicago and perhaps someday in New York. Tentative plans for the seventh festival include Seattle as a possible site.

Indiana University Northwest

O casi el alma: A Bilingual Production

CHARLES PILDITCH

In October, 1974, the Spanish Theatre Repertory Company opened its Second Latin-American Theatre Festival at the Gramercy Arts Theatre on East 27 Street in Manhattan with a bilingual production of *O casi el alma* by the Puerto Rican playwright, Luis Rafael Sánchez. After the opening performances in Spanish this modern-day miracle play was then presented several times in English by the same group with only one cast change. (The translation used was mine, done at the author's request, and was entitled "A Miracle for Maggie.")

First produced in San Juan in 1964, Sánchez' play is clearly both an anticipation of the controversial "God is dead" theme so prevalent in the following decade and an imaginative interpretation of it.

The entire play takes place in the dingy and poorly furnished room of Magdalena, or Maggie, as she prefers to be called, although she is referred to as simply "The Woman" in the list of characters. The exact locale is not specified, but it is most likely a flat in Old San Juan. Magdalena—the analogy to the biblical Mary Magdalene is intentional—has been a prostitute for six years and is now ugly, poor, weary and full of suffering.

Act One begins at two in the afternoon. Business has been bad, for it is Lent—perhaps Good Friday, to continue the analogy—and Magdalena is preparing to go out when she is interrupted by a man playing the harmonica at her open window. He is called only "The Man"; but his eyes have a strange fascination, and he resembles a shabbily-dressed, door-to-door preacher. She finally permits him to come in, and they make small-talk about her friends, the harmonica and their lives in general. "The Man" is no ordinary beggar; he philosophizes about his daily life and his feelings for all persons and things in his search for meanings in life. Magdalena does not understand all that he says and expresses her preference for not getting involved in the lives of others. He explains that this is impossible and, in a strange, almost ritualistic way, soon has her sharing his views, although she still remains rather skeptical. When he calls her Magdalena, she is surprised and insists that she is simply "Maggie," the girl in room number seven. She is even more surprised when she demands to know who this stranger is, and he calmly answers that he is the son of God. He prevents her from running out and promises to bring her the peace she has never known. She refuses to believe this blasphemy, but little by little as they speak of Man and his relation to God, she begins to fall under the spell of this strange man and to believe him. He proposes a modern-day version of the encounter between Christ and Mary Magdalene as a means of jolting "the people" out of their lethargy and indifference toward God and of bringing God back to Man as well as Man to God. Believing that God will thus be with her forever more and that she is to be the instrument for Man's redemption, Magdalena goes out into the streets to announce that God has appeared to her and ordered her to follow His son.

Act Two begins at four o'clock the same afternoon. It is raining and a

certain sadness seems to have fallen over the room. The Man is awaiting Maggie's return. When she appears, her clothing is torn and her hair disheveled. With great animation she relates how the people have believed the false miracle and have exalted her and called her a saint. The Man announces to her how they must now continue the mission they have begun; and even though she knows it is all a fabrication, she wants to believe it is true and that she has really been redeemed and saved from her former life. They speak of truth, lies, appearances and reality. The Man becomes violent in his fervor for carrying out his plan for the salvation of the people and finally convinces Magdalena that she has no other alternative but to help him. God has been silenced through the people's neglect of Him, and He must be brought back into their consciences with tactics more suitable to today than those of the past. In the closing apotheosic moments of the act, The Man (true incarnation of Jesus or some poor fool on an ego trip?) engages in a descriptive litany of Christ to which Magdalena must reply at each pause, "You, the son of God." Calling on all to rise and follow him, The Man "sees" them doing so and implores Magdalena, who has gotten up and approached him, to see them too as the curtain falls.

When the third act begins, an unspecified amount of time has passed since the "miracle," and it is the day of the final condemnation. Maggie's room has a very different appearance. The old furniture has been replaced by many folding chairs, and the air seems hazy like that inside a church. Under The Man's tutorship, Magdalena has been preaching, conducting prayer services and taking collections. She is being treated more and more like a saint by the people although it is now clear that for The Man it has all become a money-making scheme; nevertheless, he still maintains that he was divinely inspired to pardon and love mankind and redeem Magdalena. After he leaves, the tone of the play changes considerably, becoming almost comical in certain respects, with the appearance of "The Lady." She is the archtypical, upper middle-class society matron: club-woman, fund-raiser, party-goer and pseudo-religious do-gooder as long as there is publicity for her and her group. She has come to ask Maggie's permission to call her club "The Servants of Magdalena" and assures her they will do many charitable works. Magdalena agrees, not knowing what else to do under these circumstances. Happy in her ignorance, The Lady leaves promising to return the next day with a reporter. "The Envoy" then enters. He is a priest for whom Magdalena has sent in order to confess the false miracle. He knows what has been happening, but neither he nor the Church has taken an official position on it. What he has observed, however, is a new outpouring of faith and devotion in the people, a new spirit of religiosity. When Magdalena tells him the truth, he is shocked but at the same time reluctant to do anything to contradict this new-found faith. At the risk of losing their own souls, they—The Envoy, The Man and Magdalena—must never tell the people it was all a lie, for the truth would destroy them. Let God be the final judge. The Envoy leaves, and Maggie, tormented by her guilt, is left alone to await the will of God.

Spanish Theatre Repertory Company is to be congratulated not only for producing such a thought-provoking contemporary play but also for making it accessible to a non-Spanish-speaking public through its performances in English.

Rutgers University

Teatro Bilingüe

JOSEPH ROSENBERG

Teatro Bilingüe was formed at Texas A&I University in Kingsville in 1972 when Dr. Randall J. Buchanan, head of the drama department, decided to put a Spanish language play on the regular season's bill. This was something of a historic occasion, for though many language departments all over the nation have done plays in foreign languages, Texas A&I University decided to bring experienced actors and technicians into the picture and to train theatre students in bilingual production. The writer was chosen to head this project.

The first problem was to identify a playscript suitable for the occasion of opening up theatre to a new public, one which had in the past felt disenfranchized and which considered itself alienated against "anglo" theatre. Such a script was found after much international voyaging and correspondence. In March of 1973 we opened with the North American premiere of *La fiaca*, a play which had made a name for itself throughout the Latin world (playing in Mexico City alone 1500 times) and in many parts of Europe as well.

It was not long before word got around about our venture. We toured modestly, first in Corpus Christi, then in Mexico. Mr. Miro Morville, then consul for cultural affairs in Monterrey and now First Secretary at the Embassy in Madrid, arranged for an interchange with the Universidad de Nuevo León. This interchange is now in its third year and gives every indication of thriving for some time to come.

Our concentration had been primarily upon the needs in bilingual theatre in South Texas, so we were considerably surprised by the international repercussions of our venture. We were asked to speak about our project on Voice of America when we played in Monterrey. Shortly after our successful reception there we were bombarded with requests for tours on an international scale.

By the spring of 1974 we had ventured into translation, so that the same actors could perform a play in Spanish and another time in English. We were given permission to use *Historias para ser contadas* and *Milagro en el mercado viejo* by the Argentine playwright, Osvaldo Dragún, for this purpose. After performing these plays in the U.S., we went on a long tour in Mexico, this time as a repertory company, offering the Dragún plays and *La fiaca*. We played in Monterrey, San Luis Potosí, Morelia and Mexico City, the latter at C.L.E.T.A.-U.N.A.M.

On our return to Texas we hosted Ricardo Talesnik, author of *La fiaca* and his wife, actress Henny Trayles. They premiered a new play in Kingsville and then went on a Texas tour with us. That tour included their new play, *Traylesnik* (the title has since been changed to *Flechazo* for the opening in Buenos Aires), *La fiaca* and the Dragún plays. We played at San Antonio, Houston, Corpus Christi and at the Pan-American University Festival in Edinburg.

After two months of solid touring we felt that we needed to rest, but we were not destined to do so. The new consul for cultural affairs in Monterrey, Douglas Elleby, wanted us to perform again in Northern Mexico, with the result that in

August we played in Ciudad Victoria, Torreón and at the Tecnológico in Monterrey. These productions were in Spanish only, but we were later invited to Tech to perform another play, *Waiting for Godot,* in English. When the mayor of Monterrey decided to celebrate Inter-american Week, we were again called upon to perform.

Since that time we have put on a third play in both languages, *Hatful of Rain.* Our international horizons have expanded even more. We were invited by the American Embassy in Madrid to perform bilingually there in April. That date was postponed because of internal problems in Spain, and is now tentatively set for the Fall. We will tour *Hatful of Rain* in Mexico in May. In June our group has been invited to perform in Mexico City, alongside the professionals, for the entire month, and we are making arrangements to finalize this program.

We still think of ourselves as an organization serving a locality. We are developing small units to service South Texas inexpensively and frequently with plays we would tour to elementary and high school assemblies and to community theatres. We are flattered by the international attention our project has received, and we hope to continue to work in that area, but we hope to make our main efforts in the creation of a local market for good bilingual theatre and in the training of teachers equipped to handle that task.

Texas A&I University